Leo Strauss on Liberalism and Nihilism

Daniel O'Toole

Review: *Leo Strauss on Democracy, Technology, and Liberal Education*, by Timothy W. Burns (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2021), 201 pp. Hardcover, $95.00.

Timothy Burns's *Leo Strauss on Democracy, Technology, and Liberal Education* is one of the best studies yet of the thought of Leo Strauss. The appeal of Burns's book is that it takes up Strauss's reflections on our modern civilizational crisis. It aims to show how Strauss can help us understand the deepest sources of that crisis and how we might navigate if not overcome it. Yet Burns also intends to clarify the genuine character of political philosophy as Strauss understands it—meaning Socratic or classical political philosophy—and distinguish it from modern, *politicized* philosophy, science, and thought. It's this latter task that constitutes the real heart of the book.

Burns doesn't sugarcoat what the classics thought it best to sugarcoat. In this, he amplifies what Strauss already presents with a certain degree of boldness. Such candor is justified by the extent to which the Western philosophical tradition—through both scholastic syntheses and modern polemics—makes it nearly impossible for modern readers to grasp the true core of classical rationalism by their own lights. Such candor is also justified, I believe, by the simple fact that presenting isn't the same as vindicating the harsher aspects of classical rationalism. Readers may yet conclude that the more hopeful Biblical view can withstand the challenge posed by the more austere classical view, or, contrary to what Strauss and Burns seem to suggest, that some fruitful synthesis between the former and elements of the latter can be worked out. On its own, however, classical rationalism maintains a rather sober, almost bleak, view of man's place in the whole. The classical philosophers came to believe it most likely that the only eternal things in the universe are the blind necessities that govern it. That means that the immortal gods and divine sources that are supposed to sustain our communities and moral commitments are rooted in mere myth, and that all the works of man—his efforts to realize a noble, just, lasting home on earth—are fated like everything else to decay and death. Man cannot attain or even partake of the immortality he so longs for.

One of the great virtues of Burns's account is that it brings out progressive liberalism's failure to grasp what the significance would be if man's origins truly were godless and chaotic. Burns shows this in his fourth chapter through an analysis of Strauss's detailed, devastating review of a book by Eric Havelock, which attempts to read the assumptions of progressive liberalism into Pre-Socratic and sophistic thought. Yet according to Strauss, all of the classical philosophers and scientists—whether Socratic or not—essentially agreed about man's original natural condition. In the broad classical view, nature hardly provides for man; man is compelled to fend for himself in his natural, needy condition. Not only must he develop technical arts, but he must also commit brutal acts of injustice against his fellow man if he's to survive. To live more decently, man needs civilization. But in calling on men to live justly, civilization must conceal from man his imperfect beginnings. It must hide from him the original terror. According to the traditional authorities that constitute civilization, man's origins are in fact a golden age, where the gods provide for him. They teach that man was never compelled by necessity to commit acts of injustice; rather, the evils he confronts in the world around him in the present are the consequences of the generations of men having *freely chosen* to become vicious and commit acts of injustice. The principal reason that civilization must deceive man about his real origins is that the force of the laws that hold civilization together depend on men believing in their own moral culpability (103–6). Burns could have also stressed the way in which traditional authorities trace their regime's laws to divine lawgivers or to lawgivers who have learned from the gods: only the gods can truly claim the authoritative wisdom that can establish a people's way as the right way.[1] And only the gods can make justice, nobility, and virtue into the sources of transcendent and intrinsic fulfillment that we hope they are. As Burns rightly notes, belief in universal moral standards, in something like Plato's ideas, is already implicit in the traditional moral framework (148). In any case, in all of these ways, civilization deceives man; it partly helps him satisfy his natural needs, especially his biological needs, but it also partly conceals nature and inhibits man from fully satisfying his genuine natural needs. Indeed, civilization is sustained and constituted by opinions, many of which are false opinions, concerning the nature of the world and our needs.

[1] See Ian MacFarlane, "Liberal Education as the Recovery of Classical Moral and Political Reasoning," *Perspectives on Political Science* 52, no. 1 (January 2023): 9–10.

Whereas Strauss shows that classical philosophy makes thematic the mythological and ultimately conventional character of the traditional teachings that guide civilization, he believes that liberals fail to fully appreciate what's at stake in the distinction between nature and convention. Early modern liberals were overly confident in our ability to squarely face the ugliness of our origins and then derive rational conventions in accord with our genuine natural needs. Later progressive liberals, such as Havelock, are too quick to believe that conventions develop organically in response to our changing historical needs. That's to say, liberals tend to be overly confident in the harmonious relationship between nature and convention, and hence they fail to confront what Strauss calls the "problem of civilization" (see 155–64). This leads them to defer excessively to the claims made by man's conventions and to place too much confidence in man's conventions. By investing so much in what man makes, they tend to lose sight of man's concern with the whole and his longing for eternity—and so they tend to forget the ultimate futility and insignificance of human affairs in light of the whole and of eternity. Burns is fond of referring to what Strauss says of Hobbes: "Somehow the experience, as well as the legitimate anticipation, of unheard-of progress within the sphere which is subject to human control must have made him insensitive to 'the eternal silence of those infinite spaces' or to the crackings of *moenia mundi*." Strauss traces the constriction of man's vision from the Enlightenment to subsequent developments in modern thought. In later historicist thought, "'History' ... fulfils the function of enhancing the status of man and of his 'world' by making him oblivious of the whole or of eternity."[2]

In connection with this, we note here that Burns finds striking similarities between Strauss's assessment of progressive liberal thought and his assessment of Heideggerian existentialism. Burns persuasively argues that Strauss's main criticism of Heidegger is that he loses sight of philosophy's concern with the eternal, because he doesn't sufficiently appreciate the way in which the human world looks beyond itself. Since he doesn't grasp the precise character of conventional authority and the problem with it, he doesn't think that thought can or should ultimately seek to liberate itself from historical forces, which, in the classical view, must inevitably fall far short of wisdom. Heidegger's existentialism "presents one's historical situation or fate or particular political, legal, or historical situation—or what to the

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[2] Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 175–76; see Burns, 42n6, 50–51, 51n17, 112, 122.

ancients, including the pre-Socratics, is convention—as that which must be freely embraced by anyone who would live a 'resolute,' actively engaged existence" (163).

In traditional life, conventional authority is political, moral, and religious in character. It is constituted, above all, by divine law. It reflects man's concern with his place in the broader universe and promises to satisfy his longing for providential support and immortality. Genuine political philosophy emerges out of the normal, pre-theoretical awareness we find within the horizon of convention and divine law. It starts by taking seriously the claims and concerns we confront in communal, political life. Burns quotes an unpublished lecture by Strauss on John Dewey that nicely shows the origin of the philosophic question of the right way of life:

> The question of the whole policy of the country can be said to be the most serious question. It is a question, as is shown by the fact that there are different parties, different trends. If that question is clarified, it is the question of what is the right aim of living together? what is the standard with reference to which all actions and institutions are to be judged? This most serious question is the primary justification of "quest for truth." It is from this question that the philosophic tradition, the tradition founded by Socrates, starts. (94–95)

Hence the question of the community's ends leads to the question of man's ends simply, and this inquiry according to Strauss entails discovering "knowledge of human nature," which "in its turn requires knowledge of the place of man in the universe." In this way, our original *practical* orientation gives way to a *theoretical* orientation or attitude—"i.e. the attitude guided by the interest in knowing only" (95–96).

Burns's accounts of political philosophy's examination of moral and political opinions and its relationship to ancestral tradition and religious belief are among the finest parts of the book (see 37–51, 91–106). I wonder, though, whether he goes too far—as Strauss does at times—in portraying political philosophy as a mere preliminary stage of inquiry that legitimates philosophy or science proper. It seems to me that our serious studies are always animated, at least in part, by a concern with understanding what's good for us and what our ultimate fate is. We privilege the study of the nature of man and his political existence as well as the study of the overarching nature and origins of the universe as whole, because these studies bear the greatest importance for our lives.

But however this may be, why has the experience of the moral and political things that give rise to philosophy become so distorted for us? Why do we no longer encounter the world in the normal way—under the authority of divine law? In his introduction and treatment of the opening chapters of *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* on liberal education, Burns shows how it is that Strauss thought that modern thought transformed our world and brought about our philosophical and political crisis. Modern politics dismantles aristocracy and places the state on a secular, rationalist, and popular foundation. For the classics, the best though highly imperfect safeguard for decent politics was to give some decisive share of the rule in the regime to a class of gentlemen aristocrats who've been liberally educated and can devote serious time to study and political service. But of course, this requires securing for them a life of leisure by securing their large landed estates and relieving them of the need to work for their wealth. The classical preference accepts an economy of scarcity where the vast multitude is arbitrarily confined to a life of slavish labor, sustaining the leisure of the ruling class.

The modern transformation seeks to rectify the many injustices that this arrangement, even at its best, must depend upon. It seeks to replace the economy of scarcity with an economy of plenty, and this requires the unleashing of capitalism and technological progress. Burns calls particular attention to the underappreciated fact that Strauss stresses in numerous places that the decisive difference between the ancients and moderns concerns their stance toward technology (see 2 ff.). The former recognize the benefit of particular technological developments, especially for warfare; but with an eye toward maintaining reverence for established laws and customs, they insist on the careful political supervision of which technological developments are permitted or not. The latter embrace technological experimentation and invention and expect state and society to adjust accordingly. The acceptance of such ongoing, often tumultuous change requires enlightenment. It requires philosophers and intellectuals to make a popular defense of science and for science in turn to earn popular support by enhancing our material wellbeing. As a consequence of these efforts, modern society treats science not primarily as a *theoretical*, somewhat-questionable pursuit, but as an emphatically *practical*, beneficial technological pursuit.

Yet the modern transformation doesn't succeed in ushering in the rule of a liberally educated demos—a "universal aristocracy"—or even a liberally educated "natural aristocracy"

that represents the people in the government. Rather, it brings to power an industrial, commercial elite. The spirit of technological progress and acquisition comes to pervade the whole society. Very few, even among the elite, learn to embrace a life of leisure. In some sense, it becomes even harder to provide a genuine liberal education amidst modern plenty and mass politics. In his discussion of liberal education in modern times, Strauss notes that sensible liberals saw a need to educate a gentlemanly class in the classics. But with reference to *The Federalist*, he gently shows that the type of men who will govern in modern republics will tend to be men who rise up through the modern economy—merchants, wealthy landlords, and men of the learned professions, especially lawyers—and that they won't have the same inclination and capacity for liberal learning as their classical counterparts.[3] This difficulty is compounded by the fact—indicated by Strauss, and nicely brought out by Burns—that modern politics displaces that other great source of moral formation: religious education.

But alas, some elite must govern, even in modern mass politics. Can we provide that elite with the requisite liberal education for governing well? This is the consideration Strauss ultimately takes up in his second *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* essay on liberal education. Liberal education can mean no more than "the endeavor to found an aristocracy within democratic mass society."[4] It can never become universal but "will always remain the obligation and the privilege of a minority," and we shouldn't "expect that the liberally educated will become a political power in their own right. For we cannot expect that liberal education will lead all who benefit from it to understand their civic responsibility in the same way or to agree politically." Strauss makes clear that a liberal education involves the reading of great books, but he says more about what it is not—technocratic, positivistic, specialized—than about its proper political content. He suggests that its ultimate outcome will be a wisdom that's inseparable from moderation. Indeed, he hopes that "it may again become true that liberally educated men will be politically moderate men." This may allow them to "again receive a hearing even in the market place." They'll apparently see that "wisdom requires unhesitating loyalty to a decent constitution and even to the cause of constitutionalism." "Moderation," Strauss says, "will protect us against the twin dangers visionary expectations from politics and unmanly contempt for politics." Yet Strauss also counsels moderation in

[3] Leo Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 16–17; see Burns, 52–54.
[4] Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, 5, 10.

our expectations of what liberal education can do: "In thinking of remedies we may be compelled to rest satisfied with palliatives. But we must not mistake palliatives for cures."[5]

It's hard to read Strauss's discussion of liberal education or Burns's account of it and think it could make much of any difference in our political world today. How could we even hope to provide a sizeable enough minority with a real great books education, let alone expect that that education could form an aristocracy in democracy with any real force? One is struck by the gap between the harsh—perhaps at times overly harsh—characterizations of liberal democracy that one can find in Strauss and Burns and the remedy and political temperament they recommend for coping with it. On the other hand, one might find an even greater gap between reality and remedy if one finds that one no longer lives under a decent constitution. In such circumstances, doesn't the cause of constitutionalism and the manly acceptance of politics require much bolder political activity—perhaps an effort to change or re-found one's regime—than what political moderation as most people understand it allows? In such circumstances, isn't the confidence that things will work out, or that they'll remain decent enough, itself a form of immoderation—a sort of muted yet still visionary expectation that our political progress renders tyranny and barbarism problems of the past? Finally, in light of the weakness of the aristocracy within democracy that liberal education could ever hope to produce, one might even be tempted to wonder whether we should seek to restore real aristocracy to modern politics through some kind of radical political action.

It's with these thoughts in mind that we consider the subject of Burns's third chapter, Strauss's "German Nihilism" lecture, which he delivered during the Second World War. For it's there that Strauss considers the Conservative Revolutionaries of interwar Germany—the thinkers who sought to overthrow modern liberal democracy and who paved the way for Germany's embrace of Nazism. This lecture has attracted a great deal of attention recently, both from those within or sympathetic to today's far or "dissident" right and from those who fear and loath it. It's tempting when reading Strauss's lecture to downplay either how sympathetic Strauss is to the German nihilists or his criticisms of them. Burns does neither. He sees that they sought to recover the genuine rootedness and moral seriousness that are undermined by liberalism and its ideal of the open society. Serious moral life is only possible within the closed society, where men are called to sacrifice themselves. The open society is

[5] Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, 22–25.

based on a lie—there can never be a truly open society—but the nihilists correctly saw that the attempt to realize it liberates amoral self-seeking and indulgence and undermines morality. Burns provides a nice elaboration on why the opposition between moral seriousness and the open society is unavoidable:

> The root of nihilism was … *love of morality* seen as threatened by the principles of modern society, and the lack of moral seriousness, including the lack of a certain confrontation with mortality, that that society engendered. The open society—toward which, we must note, liberal societies tend even more today with the movement from liberal toleration to "diversity and inclusion"—precludes sacrifices and steadfast devotion to a distinctive, common way of life held to be good and worthy of devotion. The open society declares all former common ways of life mistaken, accepting only truncated or boutique versions of what were once parts of a vibrant, particular way of life held to be worthy of sacrifice; it accepts only "cultural" echoes of those ways manifested in textiles, gastronomy, and music, as its markets call for them, but carefully vetted for evidence of hatred of the other, or "phobias." The open society, the liberal society outlined for the first time by Hobbes, says, "to get along, go along," or "better to switch than fight." It is cosmopolitan, eschewing oaths, sacred principles and customs, a serious way of life, things to which we bow, stand in awe or revere, to which we subordinate our own interests, and which one stands ready to defend with one's life. (76–77)

In the "German Nihilism" lecture, it's not difficult to see that Strauss agrees to some considerable extent with the nihilists' spiritual objections to liberalism. As a young man he revered Nietzsche, the philosopher who most influenced the thinkers of the Conservative Revolution, and for a time Strauss seems to have sympathized with the political thought of that movement. As is evident from his 1932 critique of Carl Schmitt's *The Concept of the Political*, he didn't embrace the irrationalism or bellicosity that could be found on the right. Yet he also there calls for "a radical critique of liberalism." That "urgent task" can "be completed only if one succeeds in gaining a horizon beyond liberalism," as Schmitt did not.[6] And indeed, though Burns doesn't mention it, it's well-known now that in 1933 Strauss wrote a letter to Karl Löwith in which he affirms his commitment to "right-wing principles"—to "fascistic, authoritarian, *imperial* principles"—in opposition to liberalism. He denies that Nazism's intolerance toward Jews like himself discredits the former and necessitates a turn toward the latter. "There exists no reason," he says, "to crawl to the cross, to liberalism's

[6] Strauss, "Notes on Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*," in Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political: Expanded Edition*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 122.

cross as well, as long as somewhere in the world there yet glimmers a spark of the *Roman* thought"—and he refers approvingly to Caesar's and Virgil's teachings on imperial rule.[7]

But then did Strauss abandon his sympathy for fascism at some point in the following years? He hoped for an Allied victory in the war, and his lecture on the German nihilists makes clear that they did ultimately deserve to be called nihilists. In order to see why, I think it's helpful to sketch out the argument of the latter half of the lecture. Nihilism in the precise sense, Strauss explains, is "the rejection of the principles of civilisation as such." Civilization is "the conscious culture of humanity," which means "the conscious culture of reason." Since "human reason is active, above all … as practical reason, and as theoretical reason," the two pillars of civilization are morals and science or philosophy.[8] The German nihilists didn't only reject liberalism and communism; they didn't only seek to destroy modern civilization. They finally turned against the conscious culture of reason that is the core of civilization as such and in its place sought to elevate war and conquest. The warrior as warrior became the highest type for them, and the military virtues the highest virtues. They could no longer see that peace is the end of war. But "war is a destructive business. And if war is considered more noble than peace, if war, and not peace, is considered *the* aim, the aim is for all practical purposes nothing other than destruction."[9]

Strauss traces the nihilists' destructive passion back to the tradition of German militarism, and he traces that back to German romanticism and idealism. Its core was really a moralistic passion. More than any other Western people, the Germans rebelled against the lowness of bourgeois liberalism and its morality of enlightened self-interest. For this, Strauss credits their thought greatly: "against that debasement of morality, and against the concomitant decline of a truly philosophic spirit, the thought of Germany stood up, to the lasting honour of Germany." But German philosophers took the healthy love of nobility to its unhealthy, destructive extreme: they "insisted on the *difference* between the morally good and self-interest" and between the noble and the useful; "they insisted on self-*sacrifice* and self-*denial*; they insisted on it so much, that they were apt to forget the natural aim of man which is happiness; happiness and utility as well as commonsense became almost bad names in

[7] Strauss to Karl Löwith, Paris, May 19, 1933, trans. William H.F. Altman, in Altman, *The German Stranger: Leo Strauss and National Socialism* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011), 227.
[8] Strauss, "German Nihilism," eds. David Janssens and Daniel Tanguay, *Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy* 26, no. 3 (Spring 1999): 364–65.
[9] Strauss, "German Nihilism," 369.

German philosophy." Courage or military virtue became preeminent precisely because it's "the only unambiguously nonutilitarian virtue." German philosophy thus belittled the concerns of our mundane world. It "created a peculiarly German tradition of contempt for commonsense and the aims of human life, as they are visualized by commonsense." This moral zeal was supposed to mark the revival of the classical spirit. German philosophy had initially attempted to synthesize the pre-modern and modern ideals. The failure of that synthesis led to the more radical effort "to purify German thought completely from the influence of the ideas of modern civilisation, and to return to the pre-modern ideal." But even that effort could not truly recover the pre-modern ideal: "the pre-modern ideal was not a *real* pre-modern ideal, but a pre-modern ideal *as interpreted* by the German idealists, i.e. interpreted with a polemic intention against the philosophy of the 17th and 18th century, and therefore distorted."[10] As a consequence, German nihilism was animated by an excessive and distorted love of the noble. If early modern thought is overly utilitarian, romantic thought reacts too strongly against it and goes too far in the opposite direction. The genuine classical view appreciates the complex and tension-ridden ways in which human beings are moved both by a love of the noble and by worldly self-interest.

At the end of his lecture, Strauss holds up the English, surprisingly, as the defenders of "the eternal principles of civilisation." The English, not the Germans, best partake of the classical spirit. Even though the modern ideal was originated by English (and Scottish) philosophers and scientists, "the very Englishmen who originated it, were at the same time versed in the classical tradition, and the English always kept in store a substantial amount of the necessary counterpoison." Their leading universities, Oxford and Cambridge, better preserved "the pre-modern ideal, the classical ideal of humanity," than anywhere else. What makes the English superior to the Germans is their "very un-German prudence and moderation not to throw out the baby with the bath, i.e. the prudence to conceive of the modern ideals as a reasonable adaptation of the old and eternal ideal of decency, of rule of law, and of that liberty which is not license, to changed circumstances."[11] A major reason for Strauss's rejection of German nihilism, we might say, is that its underlying romanticism inevitably leads to visionary expectations from politics, and those expectations drive men to

[10] Strauss, "German Nihilism," 370–72; see also Burns, 108–110.
[11] Strauss, "German Nihilism," 372–73.

destroy the traditions that are essential for civilization. Strauss seems to have concluded that the conservative liberalism of the English, by contrast, presents a decent model for politics in the modern world.

One might question Strauss's estimation of just how much counterpoison the English still had left, and one might wonder whether he really thought through what kind of spiritual toll the World Wars were taking on them. But even still, if one takes him at his word, one notices just how qualified his endorsement of their conservative liberalism really is. He praises the English more in spite of their modern principles than because of them. And he closes his lecture on a note which Burns doesn't discuss and which would startle most readers today:

> It is the English, and not the Germans, who *deserve* to be, and to *remain*, an *imperial* nation: for only the English, and not the Germans, have understood that in order to *deserve* to exercise imperial rule, *regere imperio populos*, one must have learned for a very long time to spare the vanquished and to crush the arrogant: *parcere subjectis et debellare superbos*.[12]

In his final draft, Strauss cut the following line he had written from the very end: "not the way of Ariovistus"—the Germanic king who battled Caesar—"but only the way of Caesar and Augustus is the road to empire."[13] The Latin line he quotes is from Virgil's *Aeneid*, and it's the very same line he mentions in his 1933 letter to Löwith. Strauss resisted the nihilistic temptation, but at the same time he never really embraced the liberal approach to politics or abandoned his preference for the pre-modern approach to politics. Even in the midst of the war, he apparently still retained his affinity for "the Roman thought"—for imperial rule, if not for fascism.

The peace Strauss made with liberal democracy seems to have been the consequence of his political moderation. He saw a real threat from Nazism during the Second World War and from communism during the Cold War, and he thought that their totalitarianism, militarism, and lawlessness made liberal democracy, whatever its vices, clearly preferable to them. The principal advantage of liberal democracy is its adherence to the rule of law. It limits the rule of the unwise, and its scheme of representation dimly approximates the rule of gentlemen. Thus Strauss came to the view that "liberal or constitutional democracy comes

[12] Strauss, "German Nihilism," 373.
[13] Strauss, "German Nihilism," 378n31.

closer to what the classics demanded than any alternative that is viable in our age."[14] In his day at least, he judged that radical action to return to some genuinely aristocratic, pre-modern form of politics wouldn't succeed and would do more harm than good. But this qualified defense of liberal democracy doesn't preclude the possibility that new circumstances could arise in the modern world that would make such a return viable and desirable again. For us, this issue becomes more and more relevant to the extent that liberal or constitutional democracy becomes liberal or constitutional in name only—that is, to the extent that lawlessness and unrepresentative government replace our older constitutional regimes. Honest students of classical political philosophy can disagree about the extent of our decline, but they understand that the rule of law will break down at some point. They understand that all regimes come to an end—they eventually succumb to some kind of regime change, if they're not destroyed outright—and ours in the modern West are no exception.

Still, one can hardly imagine something like classical aristocracy or the mixed regime returning to the modern world any time soon. In fact, what's far more likely is that world will grow more oligarchic and despotic and more anarchic and dysfunctional at the same time. To the extent that some sort of "classical" solution arises it may take a rather authoritarian or illiberal form. An increasing number in the modern West are now seriously considering the case for Caesarism—the term Strauss uses for the kind of post-constitutional, post-republican despotism that befits a corrupt people.[15] It's an open question whether a revival of classical politics, considering the various forms it could take, would mark any sort of improvement over the liberal republics of the older America and Britain. It may well be the case that the best we could hope for is a revival of some of the traditionalism, lawfulness, and moral seriousness that persisted under that older liberalism before they came under assault by progressive liberalism for being "illiberal" or "fascistic."

It must be said that Burns's Strauss doesn't much wrestle with the question of the regime in this way. The essays Burns explores show the essential weaknesses and sources of dissatisfaction in liberal democracy. "German Nihilism" further shows the dangers of an irrational if noble-minded right-wing revolt against it. Yet the simple fact is the right doesn't pose a serious threat to our politics and to what remains of the rule of law. Despotism and

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[14] Strauss, *On Tyranny: Corrected and Expanded Edition, Including the Strauss-Kojève Correspondence*, eds. Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 194–95.

[15] See Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 178–80.

violence in the name of antifascism, not fascism, are where the real threat lies. In his "Remarks on the Continued Battle for the Soul of the Nation" before Independence Hall, President Biden said that those who make up the populist right—"MAGA Republicans"—"represent an extremism that threatens the very foundations of the republic," that they "do not believe in the rule of law," that they "thrive on chaos," that they "spread fear and lies ... for profit and power," that they "promote authoritarian leaders," that "they fan the flames of political violence," and that they are "committed" "to destroying American democracy." Biden's words are ominous because he speaks for the regime and the ruling class and signals their intent to silence political opposition and their confidence in doing so. For regime critics on the right, the danger isn't that many of them will live up to Biden's wild exaggerations, but rather that they'll lose themselves in a political romanticism that prevents them from confronting our challenges realistically or leads them to disengage from practical politics altogether. To his credit, Burns doesn't draw the lesson from "German Nihilism" that we should fear that the Nazis are staging a comeback. As he reveals in the final paragraph of the book, he understands that the primary source of nihilism today comes from the left-wing identity politics, which attacks freedom of speech and science and which "stands against modern constitutionalism and moves in the direction of a new, secular despotism" (184–85).

This is correct, though it misses the other half of our political sickness: the prominence of an oligarchy whose rise is partly attributable to the modern developments Burns treats in his early chapters and partly to the construction of the modern progressive state. Likewise, as I indicated above, it seems to me that the remedies (or palliatives) for our problems that Burns draws out of Strauss are a good start but are ultimately insufficient. Aside from promoting education in the great books and a commitment to constitutionalism, Burns suggests we need to restore serious religious traditions, a classical moral-political way of reasoning which resists ideology and the politicization of philosophy, and the habit of looking to models of human greatness in men like Winston Churchill. Now about Churchill, I must confess that it seems to me that Burns exaggerates his significance in Strauss's thought in general and in "German Nihilism" in particular. Strauss claims in the lecture that whereas the young German nihilists weren't impressed by the technical arguments they heard from their opponents, they would have been impressed if they had heard a statesman who spoke

as Churchill did in 1940.[16] But I think it's a stretch to take this to imply that Churchill's example could have persuaded them to support modern democracy rather than seek its destruction (73; see also 74, 80, 82–83, 101). There are limits to what greatness can achieve.

But my bigger concern is that Burns's Strauss seems overly averse to mixing philosophy and politics. The great books of political philosophy, both ancient and modern, to which Strauss pointed his students have a great deal of practical guidance to offer us beyond teaching the perils of progress. They can help us to better grasp what kind of regime we have, what its evils are, what remains good about it, what its prospects are, and how it compares to its rivals. They can help us to think through not only how to preserve our regime but how we might improve or alter it if we have to. They can help us think more clearly about justice—and free us from the endless and nihilistic pursuit of "social justice." Furthermore, the cause of constitutionalism in the modern world is inseparable from the arguments of modern political philosophy. We need to look to the ancients and the moderns both to help us think through how to direct and limit state power, and what kinds of freedoms we should and shouldn't permit. All of this is to say, students of political philosophy have a role to play in helping guide political action even if they cannot or will not aspire to rule directly. It's all well and good to talk about aristocracy within democracy cultivated by the study of the great books. But when we appreciate what Strauss and Burns show us about our civilizational sickness and the potential for catastrophe induced by developments in modern politics, thought, and technology, and when we look at the world around us with clear eyes, a sharper picture of the kind of aristocratic class we want comes into focus: what we seek is a politically shrewd counter-elite, one which has been liberated from the poisonous orthodoxies of our day and which understands the true nature of our oligarchic ruling class and the modern state. Liberal education today therefore requires a rigorous education in history and modern politics—one which cuts through the progressive mythology of the last century or so—as well as an education in the great books. For its reach to be politically powerful, its champions will need to build political support for it and fight to protect it from the regime.

I'm well aware that Strauss did not call for philosophical politics in quite the manner I've indicated. I believe this is partly because he was always more concerned with recovering and preserving philosophy than he was with the broader political world. But I also believe that

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[16] Strauss, "German Nihilism," 362–63.

the condition of what we're still calling "liberalism" appeared differently in his time than in ours. At any rate, Strauss wasn't as soft as many would like to believe. In his first book on classical political philosophy, he offers a nice thematic statement for his work as a whole. He says that Socratic rhetoric "is based on the premise that there is a disproportion between the intransigent quest for truth and the requirements of society, or that not all truths are always harmless. Society will always try to tyrannize thought."[17] Thus the interests of thought and of society are far from harmonious, but they are interconnected. Thought cannot ignore the threat posed to it by society. And it would seem to follow that in certain circumstances, in order to preserve itself, thought must help save society from itself. That is, it must take a stand for civilization—for the conscious culture of reason. When Strauss returned to that first book on classical political philosophy years later, he sketched out the tyrannical state that the modern left aspires to build. One might modify some of the details today—replacing the sole tyrant with a tyrannical class, for instance—and one should keep in mind the particular context in which he provides his sketch. But nonetheless, the essential point remains relevant and reminds us of what's at stake in politics:

> To retain his power, [the Universal and Final Tyrant] will be forced to suppress every activity which might lead people into doubt of the essential soundness of the universal and homogeneous state: he must suppress philosophy as an attempt to corrupt the young. In particular he must in the interest of the homogeneity of his universal state forbid every teaching, every suggestion, that there are politically relevant natural differences among men which cannot be abolished or neutralized by progressing scientific technology. He must command his biologists to prove that every human being has, or will acquire, the capacity of becoming a philosopher or tyrant.... [T]he cause of philosophy is lost from the start. For the Final Tyrant presents himself as a philosopher, as the highest philosophic authority, as the supreme exegete of the only true philosophy, as the executor and hangman authorized by the only true philosophy. He claims therefore that he persecutes not philosophy but false philosophies.... [In former ages,] since there was no universal state in existence, the philosophers could escape to other countries if life became unbearable in the tyrant's dominions. From the Universal Tyrant however there is no escape. Thanks to the conquest of nature and to the completely unabashed substitution of suspicion and terror for law, the Universal and Final Tyrant has at his disposal practically unlimited means for ferreting out, and for extinguishing, the most modest efforts in the direction of thought.... [T]he coming of the universal and homogeneous state will be the end of philosophy on earth.[18]

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[17] Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 27.
[18] Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 211–12.