
Reviews

Straussianism Descendant? The Historicist Renewal

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Leo Strauss e la destra americana, by Germana Paraboschi. *Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1993. 162 pp. L.25,000.*

Germana Paraboschi's book serves three basic purposes. First, the book is an introduction to and explanation of the bewildering "panorama" of positions and threads of influence in American conservative thought. It is designed for Italian-speaking intellectuals who are unlikely to be familiar with more than the basics of American political thought.¹ To accomplish this first aim, Paraboschi traces lines of historical descent in order to explain (or at least intelligibly describe) the changes in American conservative thought in the twentieth century. Second, Paraboschi seeks to organize and classify several contemporary trends in American conservative thought, as distinct from conservative politics, and to show how the view of "historical consciousness" held by a given thinker will influence his or her stance toward the current political divisions among American conservatives. This argument is made by closely analyzing the effects of Leo Strauss's war on historicism in American political thought, and the varied criticisms of it. Finally, Paraboschi dedicates a considerable amount of energy to summarizing the work of Claes Ryn, whose "value-centered historicism" she sees as an alternative to Strauss's reactionary aversion to history.

¹ All translations are the reviewer's.

In chapter one, Paraboschi argues that the American Old Right had “two souls”—the “traditionalist” and the “libertarian.” Many of the traditionalists (Robert Nisbet and Russell Kirk are the cited examples) traced their origins to the thought of Burke on one side, and the *Federalist Papers* on the other. The “conservative libertarians” (and here she mentions no one by name, but distinguishes between conservative libertarians and the followers of Ayn Rand, whom she considers a classical liberal at heart) trace their roots through Locke, Jefferson and Mill. The “libertarian conservatives” have in common with the traditionalists a general aversion to government economic interventionism and the welfare state, and an admiration for the institution of private property and free enterprise, among other things. The basic difference between the “two souls” of the Old Right becomes apparent in the libertarian emphasis on a categorical individualism and in holding that freedom simply is individual freedom, whereas the traditionalists showed their communitarian (Burkean) leanings in their willingness to accept government intervention in the social arena, e.g., against victimless crimes.

*Old Right has
“two souls.”*

Frank S. Meyer has argued that eventually these two American conservatisms came to be fused together, partly as a result of their mutual opposition to Roosevelt’s New Deal. Meyer suggests that fusionists reclaim from liberalism the priority of political liberty, but without secularism, relativism and utilitarianism. The traditionalists, according to Meyer, fail to understand that Burke’s conservatism, along with its counterpart in European liberalism, does not apply to the development of American conservatism because of the way in which the “American experience” has transformed the European schools of thought. Paraboschi seems somewhat skeptical of Meyer’s thesis, citing his detractors who say that fusionism is at best a “mere political hypothesis.” Regardless of the aptness of Meyer’s thesis, what is clear is that American conservatism became more complicated with the emergence of neoconservatism and then the New Right.

In spite of the obvious complications, Paraboschi traces many of the internal tensions in contemporary American conservative thought to the two souls of the Old Right. She identifies several basic lines of descent in the break-up of the Old Right. First, there is neoconservatism. Her line on the origins and viewpoint of neoconservatism follows Irving Kristol’s. Its continuity with the Old

Right lies mostly in its affinities with the traditionalist strands, but without significant Burkean influence, and in retaining some sense of the importance of historical consciousness. She rightly points out that the main influence of neoconservatism has been exerted in intellectual circles, and its power has greatly diminished in the last few years. The second major thread is the emergence of the New Right, which, according to Paraboschi, is "in fact more populist than conservative," its similarities with the Old Right being fairly superficial. Thus, the New Right is not to be taken seriously as a form of American conservative thought. The third major strand comprises the second and third generation Straussians, the anti-historicist camp. In spite of their internal differences, the Straussian "schools," as Paraboschi calls them, constitute a formidable edifice of American conservative thought which is still very much alive. Finally, there are theorists whom Paraboschi characterizes as traditionalist apologists of the Old Right. Here Paraboschi has in mind particularly Paul Gottfried and Claes Ryn, although Gottfried and Ryn go about this in slightly different ways, the former by appropriating Hegel, the latter by synthesizing Croce and Babbitt. I will later take exception to Paraboschi's association of these thinkers with Old Right traditionalists, particularly with regard to the thought of Ryn.

*Gottfried an
Hegelian
centrist.*

Chapter two is an account of the rise in influence of Hegel in American conservative thought through the Ohio and St. Louis Hegelians of the nineteenth century and from the 1930s to the present. Paraboschi summarizes the work of Paul Gottfried in order to outline a Hegelian version of American conservatism. She points out that, in opposition to the Straussian strand of American conservative thought, Gottfried's appreciation for historical dialectics allows for an interplay of emergent traditions in which the story of the meaning of "natural right" does not begin and end with Plato. She reads Gottfried's Hegelian centrism as successfully avoiding Marxism at one extreme and reactionary conservatism at the other. Gottfried's reinterpretation of "*Aufheben*" as "mediation" has a profound effect upon what is meant by historical consciousness and "Recht" in Hegel's sense. This enables Gottfried to side-step many of the Straussian criticisms of historicism while maintaining an important role for historical consciousness in his overall political philosophy.

Paraboschi contextualizes Gottfried's centrism by appealing to the work of other authors regarding the origins and growth of

American Hegelianism, particularly by employing Denton Snider's account of the St. Louis Hegelians. Snider interprets the St. Louis movement not as a "reaction to other movements, but more as a systematic expression of the practical preoccupations of human beings acting in their communities, to the inspiration for a social philosophy specific to American history supplied by the Hegelian dialectic and philosophy of right." Thus, the way to understand conservative Hegelians in America is to look closely at the way in which Hegelianism has been applied to American history by American Hegelians (e.g., the role of Lincoln as a world historical individual), and not to import the nineteenth century European categories of Left and Right Hegelianism. The relative absence of the standard European divisions in the Hegelian school explains the comparative weakness of communism and socialism in America on the one hand and the absence of Hegelian statism on the other. Paraboschi also follows Gottfried's account of the wider influence of twentieth century Hegelian thinkers, such as Eric Voegelin and Will Herberg, and a number of others who were communists in the 1930s, but who moved toward the center and right in the years following the second world war. Throughout American Hegelianism, the various thinkers considered by Gottfried took up a version of historicism which "notwithstanding their differences, believed in the importance of 'historical consciousness' at every turn in American conservative thought." This appreciation of the role of historical consciousness in the self-liberation of humanity is precisely what Strauss and his disciples repudiated.

Chapter three, entitled "A Conservative Farewell to History," treats Strauss and his school directly as a distinct movement in American conservative thought, and this constitutes the main thrust of the book. Its aim is to explain to readers unfamiliar with Strauss and his disciples the influence exercised by that school in American conservative thought. Since these developments are well-known in the English speaking world, there is little to be said here except to summarize the manner in which Paraboschi accomplishes the task, and to assess its accuracy.

Paraboschi begins with a section summarizing Strauss's political philosophy, particularly as stated in *Natural Right and History*. The author accomplishes this with great clarity and concision, and, in the reviewer's opinion, she has Strauss right. The second section deals particularly with Strauss's position on historical conscious-

Straussian anti-historicism prominent on the Right.

ness, which Strauss sees as the peculiar invention of nineteenth- and twentieth-century European thought, and as propagated in contemporary America's attachment to the social sciences' account of (and assumptions about) human nature. In particular, Paraboschi highlights Strauss's attack on radical historicism as embodied in the thought of Nietzsche and its ever growing influence in American political thought and popular consciousness. Section three, entitled "Writing and Persecution: The Hermeneutics of Reticence," first applies Strauss's critique of historicism to the case of Heidegger. Heidegger came to represent, in Strauss's view, the logical end of radical historicism and nihilism, his philosophy of history having "the same structure as Marx's and Nietzsche's."² Heidegger's association with the Nazis was by no means an accident on this view (Strauss's "*reductio ad Hitlerum*"). The philosophical basis for such an interpretation lies in Strauss's much maligned distinction between the exoteric (for the people) and esoteric (for the wise) levels of meaning in a philosophical work—which is what is meant by "the hermeneutics of reticence"—and Paraboschi spends the remainder of the section summarizing Strauss's case for the distinction in *Persecution and the Art of Writing*. Section four treats Strauss's American disciples: in order, Jaffa, Berns, Pangle, and Bloom. She summarizes the characteristic theories of each, and their major books, which are well-known to American students of political theory. While the differences among these disciples are often striking, what can clearly be said is that each in his own way contributed to bringing Strauss's anti-historicist polemic into prominence in American conservative thought as they applied his view to the various general areas of political and legal thought. Of particular influence were Strauss's explicit statements in *Natural Right and History* regarding the theory of natural right in the Declaration of Independence, which provided an American context within which Strauss's disciples could apply his thought to the specific problems of American political philosophy.

The fourth chapter of the book employs the thought of Claes Ryn as a critique of and alternative to the Straussian version of American conservative thought. Section one contains a brief summary of Ryn's theory of the two-fold will (higher and lower) as lying be-

² See Strauss, *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 33.

tween reason and imagination from Ryn's book *Will, Imagination and Reason*.³ By means of his particular conceptions of imagination, will, and reason, Ryn attempts to negotiate the problem of the individual and the community by making these faculties the most characteristic human endowment, on the one hand, while insisting, on the other, that they operate and have meaning only within the context of real situations in which human beings act—and these are always constituted by a concrete, historically situated community. Paraboschi's second section is a brief summary of Ryn's theory of ethical consciousness and his conception of democracy, which distinguishes between constitutional democracy (in which the constitution itself places checks upon the lower will and thus increases the likelihood that ethical consciousness will influence leaders), and plebiscitary or majoritarian democracy, the mere rule of the majority, which Ryn, like Plato, does not see as true democracy. Paraboschi then recounts what Ryn means by "value-centered historicism." Any assessment of these two sections must include a comment on the fact that Paraboschi depicts Ryn as relying more heavily upon Croce's thought than he really does. Paraboschi downplays Ryn's reliance upon Babbitt, and the reader unfamiliar with Ryn's thought would be left with the impression that he is a modern Crocean in his epistemology, which is not accurate in every respect. Ryn is not so much an idealist as a historico-dialectical realist.

Section three recounts Ryn's criticisms of the Straussian camp as working with an oversimplified understanding of what historicism is, and failing to realize that human moral reasoning is impossible without history, particularly when one considers the obvious evolutionary fact that human beings have not always been able to reason philosophically, nor to reason philosophically as they now do; the development of human reason has always been dialectical, and thus tied to historical circumstances. Section four recounts Burke's influ-

³ Claes Ryn, *Will, Imagination and Reason* (Chicago: Regnery Books, 1986). Paraboschi chooses to translate Ryn's term "imagination" with the Italian word "intuizione," although she does make the reader aware of what the English word is. This could be questioned, since "fantasia" seems the more obvious choice and captures more clearly Ryn's meaning. The basis for her choice seems to lie in Croce's use of the term "intuizione creativa," which Ryn relies upon in making out his case for imagination (a point Paraboschi is concerned to communicate to her Italian audience). To Paraboschi's credit, in any case, she clearly explains the operation of "intuizione" in Ryn's thought, which will help in avoiding confusion.

ence in American conservative thought over the past half-century, and has little to do with Ryn's thought directly.

*Ryn not easily
categorized.*

By way of providing a general assessment of the final chapter on Ryn, it should be noted that Paraboschi is correct in suggesting that Ryn shares Gottfried's concerns regarding the problem of historical consciousness, but she too quickly and easily associates Ryn with the traditionalist side of the Old Right. Ryn's synthesis of Croce and Babbitt has a number of characteristics one cannot find in Old Right traditionalism—perhaps largely because of the fact that Croce played no discernible role, and Babbitt only a limited role, in forming the views of the Old Right traditionalists. Ryn does take from Croce a dialectical approach to questions of history and historical consciousness (*ergo*, his proximity to the Hegelian camp), but contrary to the Hegelians, Ryn is anti-romantic (or at least very critical of major tendencies within romanticism), a moral realist indebted to Babbitt. This is neglected in Paraboschi's account.

Further, since Paraboschi identifies the traditionalists as deriving their position from Burke on one side and the *Federalist Papers* on the other, she should recognize that Ryn is no doctrinaire Federalist, particularly in that he does not accept, at least in unrevised form, the idea of an unchanging human nature—an assumption of the Federalists that is hard to ignore. Ryn believes instead that constitutional democracies are set up (ideally) so as to bring forward an aristocracy of morally virtuous persons. A constitution, properly formulated, serves the community in a fashion analogous to the operation of the higher will in the individual. This recasts the entire character of the debate into a question not of human nature as such (or as God made it), but of the basic nature of morality and its dialectical development. Ryn sees elements of continuity and sameness in human existence and finds at its core a transcendent ethical imperative, but even this last dimension is for him inseparable from concrete historical experience. In his view, ethical and moral values are at the bottom of what human beings are and what they become. One has no special need for a timeless view of human nature if only one can clearly understand some of the central, historically enduring values held by human beings, and their epistemological bases. Thus, for Ryn, moral knowledge is more basic than natural knowledge, and, in fact, the former shapes the latter. One finds but a trace of this in the Federalist position, and one has to do some violence to the text in order to historicize Burke thoroughly enough to interpret him this way.

Indeed, the Federalist attachment to the idea of a fixed human nature is in some ways closer to Strauss's interpretation of natural right in American political theory than to Ryn's historicism. This is a point that Paraboschi almost makes in section three of this chapter, but fails in the end to see clearly. Hence, the central point of epistemological disagreement between Ryn and the Straussians revolves around whether we can have knowledge of values which are not culturally situated—the Straussians say we can, while Ryn says we cannot. For Ryn, universality is always embodied in particularity—hence, his "value-centered historicism." This leads to a profound difference in political viewpoint between Ryn and the Straussians. Ryn makes the point that "government is indistinguishable from moral, intellectual and cultural conditions that give it shape and direction, that it manifests the preferences of an entire civilization."⁴ Here is the basic point of contention between Ryn and the Straussians, then, and at stake is what natural right *is*. There would be little in the *Federalist* to support Ryn's claim, although one can find a nascent dialectical historicism in the thought of some of the framers (particularly Madison), but Ryn is more interested in what a constitutional democracy *is* than in what the framers of a particular constitution understand themselves to be doing. Therefore, the esoterism of the Straussians is rendered useless, since we need not attribute to the framers (or any other political thinkers) a level of hermeneutic awareness which we cannot satisfactorily show they possessed. The question is more general than that—it is the question of where moral knowledge comes from, how it is actualized in human communities, and on this question depends one's entire view of what the natural aristocracy is, and whence it derives. Here Ryn's answer is original, and not to be reduced to influences from the Old Right.

The basic point of contention: the particularity of right.

On the other side, Ryn is certainly friendly to the values endorsed by Burke, and there is a strong tinge of commonsense philosophy in Ryn's theory, but it would hardly be accurate to say that he owes his conservatism (if such it is) or moral realism to Burke in any fundamental way. Paraboschi is correct to see Ryn as an alternative to Strauss and his disciples, but incorrect, in my view, to associate him too quickly with Old Right traditionalists. In large part,

⁴ Ryn, *The New Jacobinism* (Washington D.C.: National Humanities Institute, 1991), 36.

Ryn's roots lie elsewhere, in a view which has never before been a prevalent part of American conservatism.

The book as a whole is well-written, sophisticated, thoroughly researched, amazingly concise, and extremely clear. One might have wished that Paraboschi had put more of her own views and criticisms in the book, for it is difficult at times to discern what her attitude is toward the various movements she describes. But in assessing whether this is a serious weakness, it must be remembered that the most obvious goal of the book is to explain American conservative thought to persons unlikely to know, for instance, whether Hegelianism has ever had an effect upon it, or whether Croce's influence has ever been felt in the United States. In that regard, the book is an unqualified success.