
Reviews

Mostly Shadowboxing

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Leo Strauss and the American Right, by Shadia B. Drury. *New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997. 239 pp. \$35.*

The third volume of an extensive study, *Leo Strauss and the American Right* may be viewed as a completion of Shadia Drury's longtime preoccupation with Straussian political thought and its impact on American political life. From the onset of her study, a specific critical perspective has dominated Drury's approach to her subject. Leo Strauss and his disciples, it is argued, have been hostile to the liberal democratic tradition but have deftly hidden their real thoughts and agendas from unsuspecting admirers.

Like her earlier books on the politics of Strauss and on the Russo-French neo-Hegelian Alexandre Kojève and the formation of Straussian thinking, the new study is intended to expose the hidden character of misrepresented doctrines. Particularly illuminating are the discussions of Strauss's Jewish nation-

alism, reflected in a lecture delivered at the University of Chicago Hillel Foundation in 1962, and the contribution of the conservative authoritarian Carl Schmitt to Strauss's rejection of "liberalism." In both cases Drury puts aside her own left-liberal blinders and dispassionately explains significant connections. As one who has written extensively on Schmitt and Strauss, I believe that Drury is on to something when she insists that the early Strauss, who in 1932 published a probing commentary on Schmitt's *Concept of the Political*, hoped to "radicalize" the thrust of his mentor's thought. Unlike Schmitt, who praised Hobbes as someone seeking to pacify political life identified with the state of nature, Strauss believed that "the depoliticization of the world would be a catastrophe." To whatever extent Hobbes fathered liberalism by setting out to free soci-

ety of factional war and by grounding life in material concerns, Strauss thought his influence was morally ruinous. And to whatever extent Schmitt perceived value in Hobbes's project, however contemptuous he was in other contexts of liberalism's lack of heroic ideals, he, too, in Strauss's memorable phrase, "remained firmly within the limits of liberalism."

According to Drury, Strauss did not see the possibility of ennobling human life beyond the state. He held religion to be a "pious fraud" and only if dominated by the political, could theological and moral ideals be raised to opportunities for communal sacrifice and for the pursuit of a collective good. In this respect, Strauss was, contrary to the published attempts of Straussian Heinrich Meier, more, and not less, "radical" than Schmitt. For the Weimar jurist, political life remained "tragic" and connected to a quasi-theological notion of original sin. It was the fate of a fallen humanity to live in a conflictual situation, and any attempt to replace a pluriverse of contending communities with a global state was, for Schmitt, a leap into homogenizing tyranny.

For the young Strauss, by contrast, there was no framework beyond the political and communal, and Drury is correct to read Strauss's Jewish nationalism partly in this light. Strauss's defense of political Zionism as "fulfilling a conservative function" by controlling "the tide of 'progressive' leveling of ancestral differences," as explained in *National Re-*

view in 1957, was closely tied to his anti-liberalism. Strauss feared that Jews, like other groups and perhaps even more so, would dissolve as a recognizable ethnic community unless political countermeasures were taken. And so he unswervingly supported a Jewish nation-state, including its efforts to prevent intermarriage between Jews and others. Drury may go too far when she denies any "Jewish particularity" to Strauss's positions on Zionist questions. After all, millions of other Jews took the same positions for starkly national reasons, and there are no grounds to assume that Strauss's Jewish identity (which was perceived as an ethnic one) did not influence his judgments on this issue. Having grown up in a similar Jewish culture, moreover, I can discern the operation of a compensatory Jewish nationalism among German Jews accused by Eastern European Jews of being excessively Teutonic. It is therefore questionable whether one can discuss Strauss's Zionism as something not specifically Jewish. What Drury does demonstrate, however, is that his Zionist loyalty was not entirely a Jewish concern.

Strauss's intense Jewish nationalism has suffused the American Right, particularly since the beginning of its domination by neoconservatives and their Straussian ideological wing. Drury correctly notes that this focal point of neoconservative foreign policy and the neoconservative attachment to the Israeli nationalist Right have a cosmological point of origin. And she is correct to trace the

Jewish chauvinist sentiments found in the neoconservative press to Strauss's presentation in *Why We Remain Jews* of Jewish moral and existential superiority. In Strauss's tract an attempt is made to present Jews as having a special right to particularity, without reference to Rabbinic law. Drury is also right to stress that the Straussian notion of esoteric writing is based not only on the fact that writers were once persecuted by rulers but also on the belief that the masses are unfit to be told the truth. Whence the endless repetition by Straussians of pious sentiments which they believe to be empty, save for their "social value." This winking at and telling of noble lies, which numerous journalists have associated with neocon-Straussian moralizing, are implicit in Strauss's appeal to esotericism.

Where Drury goes grievously wrong, however, is in imagining that one can read the lineaments of current neocon-Straussian politics from the anti-liberal response of the youthful Strauss to Schmitt's *Concept of the Political*. The same *démarche* is attempted, with equally questionable results, by the Clinton-liberal Stephen Holmes and by Holmes's student John P. McCormick in a book on Carl Schmitt. All of these interpreters think it possible to trace back to Schmitt the "anti-liberal" politics, characterized by elitism, religiously fanatical populism, and contempt for "social justice," which they attribute to neocons and the current leadership of the Republican Party. The problem in all these cases is the *total*

lack of any fit between the two objects of this left-liberal attack. Significantly, none of the relevant critics makes any reference to Claes Ryn's *The New Jacobinism*, which cites much evidence from Straussian and neocon sources disconfirming the Holmes (and by now Drury-McCormick) interpretations. As shown by Ryn, Straussians are conspicuous advocates in the political class of global democracy and crusades for human rights. It might be added that they also advocate open borders for the United States, the revolutionary legacy of Martin Luther King, and an homogenized world politics. They attack the Left, conventional Republicans, and classical conservatives for being tepid about the very ideals Drury herself professes. To make reality fit her own grid, Drury offers repeated unsubstantiated assertions about the narrow-minded isolationist politics of neoconservatives. As an old-fashioned Taft Republican, my response is "Would that it were so!"

Drury also ascribes to the late Allan Bloom, in *Closing of the American Mind*, a hard-to-locate position in favor of elite universities being restricted to patrician families. Though Bloom notes (on page 67) that Harvard, Yale and Princeton "abandoned preference for the children of their alumni" and that this has been class-destroying, he, unlike Drury, does not preface this observation with "unfortunately." As someone who spoke with him numerous times, I can assure Drury that Bloom was *obsessively* concerned about Jewish exclusion in any form and did not

“approve of special treatment for the sons and daughters of Harvard and Yale graduates but not for the sons and daughters of former slaves.” Bloom nurtured a lifelong sense of having been excluded by upper-class WASPs during his youth in Rockford, Illinois, and he made philosphic arguments in my presence for compensating blacks, but thought it more appropriate to do so in the commercial than the academic world. While these views are emphatically not my own, they were Bloom’s and voiced often in company.

Drury makes another revealing mistake when she ascribes to me, in a long benevolent footnote, the critique of liberalism developed by Schmitt and the early Strauss. Their reading of liberalism is certainly not mine, which comes closer to Max Weber’s than Schmitt’s. From my book on Schmitt and numerous articles (as well as from the volume *After Liberalism* now in press) it is clear that I do not consider liberalism a set of disembodied ideas or principles. It is the political idea of a bourgeois, predominantly Protestant civilization and tied to the fortunes of the class and society that produced this idea. Neither Drury nor her *maître à penser*, Professor Holmes, is a liberal. Both are advocates of postliberal social engineering pushing the hegemonic

ideology of a class of state managers.

Drury tips her hand when she repeats Barbara Ehrenreich’s attack on the Republicans as a “radical right” full of “hostility to women.” The reason Newt Gingrich and the Kristol family are made to represent such a force is their slowness in coming around to a full feminist agenda. This slowness is explained in terms of a convenient pedigree of ideas traced through Strauss to Weimar-German anti-liberalism. Assuming the truth of this picture of Weimar German nonleftist intellectuals, nevertheless there is no connection between them and the present opportunistic leadership of the Republican Party. On immigration, Puerto Rican statehood, or reaching out to women and blacks, the objects of Drury’s partisan rage are simply awkward, drifting versions of herself. Drury exaggerates the rightwing character of the neocon Straussians and of Republican congressional leaders to make it appear that her quarrel is with fascistoid antiliberals. From where I stand, however, Drury is shadowboxing with people like herself and does not have to demonize Schmitt or Strauss to play such a game. Though she should provide the reader with a coherent and consistent definition of liberalism, she prefers to accuse those minimally to her right of being misogynist, authoritarian anti-liberals.