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The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss by Shadia B. Drury

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refrain about how those "bad" political appointees should go away and let the "experts" do their jobs. Conflict in government organizations between political appointees and the permanent bureaucracy is endemic and eternal. If political appointees of newly elected presidents committed to changing previous policies are not to try to change organizational cultures but should instead "be less disruptive," why bother with elections? We can turn government over to self-appointed experts who "know best" and who, not surprisingly, tend to favor the policies developed by themselves in the past. Those policies and programs are now part of the dominant organizational culture.

Resistance to change in bureaucracies is legendary. Conflict over change is especially intense when the ideology of the new political appointees is sharply opposed to the dominant culture. The fact that the old organizational cultures in the Peace Corps and VISTA have been broken up after twenty years of pounding suggests the normative conclusion that elections in the United States do eventually lead to change, even if the "old guard" is appalled. I personally feel that the demise of the Peace Corps is a "bad thing." But, writing as a former appointee to the Department of Defense, I get nervous when academics begin to talk about building "strong commitment cultures." Committed to what? Who decides? How do decisions get made? I can think of two large organizations in which a "commitment culture" of a certain kind might be fairly dangerous. After all, Lt. Col. North and Director Casey were individuals who clearly were members of a "strong commitment culture." My problem is with what Lt. Col. North and Director Casey were committed to.

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The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss. By Shadia B. Drury. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988. Pp. xv, 256. \$29.95.)

Surely it is by now widely understood, or at least suspected, that Leo Strauss used the history of political theory to develop and suggest a political philosophy the essential contents of which were equivalent to Strauss's interpretation of what he termed the teaching and wisdom of classical antiquity. But also understood is that this leaves remarkably unclear Strauss's political philosophy, since what he has to say about the classics, and about the history of political theory more generally, is, on any careful and informed reading, less than transparent. In Strauss's texts, ambiguities, and subtleties of many different kinds, are the norm. What is worse, we strongly suspect that all this cleverness has as its purpose masking Strauss's actual beliefs behind a surface or exoteric message. Hence we can never be sure we have understood him correctly, no matter how careful our reading of his work.

How brave, then, is Shadia Drury to claim to have uncovered Strauss's

esoteric philosophy, finding it a “startling” vision, “complete and compelling” yet “formidable and frightening,” that only some of his followers, and few other scholars, understand (pp. 4, 12). Such widespread misunderstanding is on Drury’s account not due solely to the fact that Strauss’s intentions and meaning are less than explicit, but also because his understanding of the ancients is so bizarre. Whereas, for instance, we all know that Plato’s Socrates refuted, or at least thought he refuted, Thrasymachus, Strauss’s view is that Socrates succeeds only in convincing Thrasymachus to keep his dangerous ideas, which Socrates in fact shares, to himself. Indeed, “Strauss believes that Plato uses Thrasymachus as his mouthpiece,” and so Drury believes that “Strauss uses Machiavelli as *his* mouthpiece” (p. 26). Most of the readers of this review can thus see that, whatever else one makes of Drury’s book, it sure is fun; the others can see that it deserves to be “denounced” (p. 17).

Essential elements of Strauss’s esoteric teaching, on Drury’s informed and careful reading, include the following: The political philosophy of genuine philosophers is their exoteric teaching, underlying which are their esoteric insights and truths. These esoteric or philosophical truths threaten civilization primarily because they establish that popular acceptance of religion and morality is essential to human order and culture, yet have no foundation in heaven or nature; religion and morality are “pious swindles” without which the human race would perish; there is in truth “no God, no unchanging moral law and no support in the universe for justice” (pp. 20, 32). Wise philosophers will therefore keep hidden from all but a few the deadly truths of philosophy, and will in addition help sustain public morality through their political, i.e. public, philosophy. This is what the wise men of antiquity did; it is what all philosophers should do; it is not what the moderns did.

So Machiavelli’s contention that politics must not be subordinated to morality is shocking to Strauss, not because it is untrue, but because it is said openly, to all; this is the kind of truth that needs to be hidden, and the sometimes nasty political prescriptions which this truth permits need to be whispered into the ears of the powerful (chap. 6). Similarly Hobbes, understanding that the good is by nature the pleasurable and that religion is a fraud, thought it permissible to speak these truths, albeit in a transformed and erroneous form: hedonism he thought could provide the foundation of a stable political order, ignoring altogether the ancient understanding that the pursuit of pleasure by all—given the inferior nature of the many and the requirement that they act unnaturally by subordinating their pleasure to the needs of the city—would destroy any civil society, just as Hobbes’s public atheism rejects altogether the ancient understanding that religion is necessary to civil society (chap. 7).

This last example is sufficient to show that Drury’s position is not that Strauss “really” sides with the moderns. She reviews Strauss’s substan-

tive disagreements and dissatisfaction with the moderns and modernity (chaps. 7 and 8), and is clear that his call for a return to the ancients is absolutely genuine. But "the ancients to whom Strauss appeals have been transfigured by Nietzsche," the individual to whom Strauss owes "his greatest intellectual debt" (p. 170). Like Nietzsche, Strauss is a kind of nihilist, one who recognizes that morality is conventional, but also that it is essential to civilization and thus in need, not of supermen, but of philosophers, who must in this age replace the dead God with another script for the vulgar (chap. 9).

While Strauss's exoteric teaching thus constitutes some variation on the theme that the wise ought to rule the many in the name of and for the sake of justice, his esoteric teaching is that wise men must gain power in order to construct flexible rules and inegalitarian institutions conducive to life, stability, peace, and philosophy, and that they use their power, and their rhetorical skills, to delude the many into believing that these wholly instrumental rules and institutions are always obligatory because they are by nature just. Drury terms "gentlemen" the followers of Strauss who understand the exoteric but not the esoteric teaching, and "philosophers" those who understand both. She is thereby able to explain some of the recent dissensus in the camp of the faithful (chap. 10), as well as their consensus that the city is badly in need of their advice. And she can predict that both kinds of Straussians will "denounce" her book, though for two altogether different reasons! She concludes by returning the favor, denouncing Strauss for seducing "young men into thinking that they belong to a special and privileged class of individuals that transcend ordinary humanity and the rules applicable to other people" (chap. 11; p. 193).

Drury has produced a lively, informed, coherent, thoughtful, and plausible account of Strauss's meaning. But Strauss's texts are so constructed, and his arguments and pronouncements so elusive, that a multiplicity of plausible interpretations are possible. Consider for instance Strauss's argument in *Natural Right and History* that there exists "a universally valid hierarchy of ends, but . . . no universally valid rules of action." Drury's interpretation of this and related arguments is that Strauss means to tell (some of) us that rules of conduct are wholly instrumental and completely flexible; but an equally plausible interpretation is that Strauss means only to say that, in constructing and judging principles of conduct, we must keep in mind both the natural ends, and the exigencies, of human life.

The difficulties here are so great that we can be sure only that we shall be hearing a good deal more about what Strauss really meant. Drury's opinion regarding the importance of Strauss notwithstanding, this is a development not all of us will welcome equally.

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