

Behind the Neo-Con Curtain Plato, Leo Strauss and Allan Bloom

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Much ink has been spilt of late on the role played by philosopher Leo Strauss (d. 1973) on the education of a number of prominent neoconservative ideologues who now occupy key intelligence and advisory positions in the Bush administration. It is ironic to see the mainstream press and culture be so willing to lodge causal continuity and blame on a foreign intellectual for homegrown extremism. The mainstream outlets are usually far more expressive in the garb worn to downplay any direct influence intellectuals might have on daily life. More typical is the trail of recycling and simplification - features from which the American mainstream press no longer seems able to wean itself. Intellectual influence may not be easy to understand, but when the trace is blurred through sensationalism it merely dissipates into irrelevance.

In the English-speaking world, Seymour Hersh is credited with having ferreted out this distant connection between the neo-cons and Strauss in a May 5 article on high-level intelligence manufacturing, published in the New Yorker. A day earlier the New York Times published an attack on Strauss's philosophy as it took aim against some of his students, such as Paul Wolfowitz, Deputy Secretary of Defense. The piece makes only a distant reference to the work done by two French journalists who had covered the subject for *Le Monde*. In these days of cowardly journalism, it would be far too normal to let credit not lie where it is due.

The fact remains that the most extensive study of the background to the neoconservative Project, their New American Century Project, was indeed published in France's *Le Monde* on April 15, 2003. It has been pillaged with scarce credit given to its original authors. More important is what has been left out of its findings. The piece not only examines the formative role of Leo Strauss on the Project, but also that of the late Albert Wohlstetter, strategy guru at the RAND Corporation and professor at the University of Chicago, and especially that of Allan Bloom, the late author of *The Closing of the American Mind*. Like Wolfowitz, Bloom had studied under Leo Strauss. Among his own students was William Kristol. And the view Bloom espoused in his massive best-seller has had a profound impact on the way Americans now view the intellectual contributions of other countries and cultures - with the exception of Israel's.

That this key *Le Monde* article was not entirely published in translated form by the New York Times or the New Yorker raises perennial questions regarding American arrogance towards the cultural and journalistic productions of other countries. Academia is thirsting through a translation drought of international social science research. The publishing moguls have shifted the market away from political economic criticism toward the child's fantasy world of Harry Potter incorporated in which even adults are begging to enter. Since postmodernism struck hard in the artistic realm, culturally attuned English-speakers seem to have become obsessed with end-points and limits, of the universe curving onto its own content as if outside the English-language there is a desert from which only the void is to be uttered. Angst with the mother tongue has rung in concert with American expansionism.

Time and time again the question is raised abroad as to why Americans show an ever decreasing mastery of foreign languages. The matter here is not that the encroachment of

American English threatens the demise of many foreign local cultures. Nor is it the troubling prospect that by the end of this century the vast majority of the world's languages risks disappearing. The scandal is that "native English-speakers are becoming less competent at other languages: only nine students graduated in Arabic from universities in the United States [in 2002], and the British are the most monoglot of all the peoples in the EU," according to a study on the triumph of English published in *The Economist*, December 22, 2001.

No one is fool enough to overlook how this has everything to do with how world power is concentrated in the USA (the foreign view) or that America is the "business center" of the world (the domestic view). Both lead to the conclusion that a general lack of interest on the part of Americans lies behind this state of things. Its cultural variant is expressed in the self-declared triumph of English.

The fact is that American corporate-controlled media, and its arms extending deep within the university, promotes general simplification of thought to the point of ignorance of all things foreign. In recent months, we've seen that ignorance shift quite naturally to fear, misunderstanding and contempt for things foreign. This is a generalization, of course. But consider this point: every weekend in countless foreign language newspapers there is no end to translated articles from the foreign and especially American press. Needless to say, the very idea of publishing translated articles in any of America's major dailies, including the *New York Times*, is enough to trigger a scoff.

What we gain in return are confused sources, fragmented paraphrasing and general ignorance on what the intelligent folk of the world think of the USA in its most recent avatar. Could it be so simple as to slot the whole lot of them into an anti-American straightjacket? Let those be satisfied who zap from Fox News to CNN (domestic or international), believing that al-Jazeera is merely al-Quaeda's propaganda weapon.

Here then is a translation of "The Strategist and the Philosopher" by Alain Franchon and Daniel Vernet as it appeared in *Le Monde*. It's an insightful study of those un-elected technocrats who have infiltrated Washington DC to steer US policy according to an original plan slowly metabolized over the decades - and drafted well before September 11 ever resounded with dial emergency. But for them dial it did, and this group of a dozen or so intellectuals has profoundly affected the American federal political structure in the most dubious of ways.

What the legacy of Leo Strauss most pertinently poses in terms of problems for American political life is his conviction that democracy is only functional if it is a militant, indeed military democracy. 'Tyranny' is what hovers close to its institutions, literally a specter away, capable of seizing its blood and duplicating its genetic structure imperceptibly. All means necessary should be deployed to fight this fate. The mystery of philosophy itself is shorn of its critical skin in a not unfamiliar attempt, historically speaking, at claiming how in the abstract world of thought opposites tend to meet. Democracy becomes authoritarian, just like progressive philosophies putatively turn into concrete terror...

For the record, and though the pages of *CounterPunch* are perhaps not the most appropriate place to lead a debate on philosophical texts, Professor Gary Leupp's recent characterization of the neo-cons as "philosopher-kings" throws in the towel far too easily to a Straussian send up of an infamous concept (see Gary Leupp, "Philosopher Kings: Leo Strauss and the Neo-Cons", May 24, 2003.) If Strauss's thought can be legitimately rooted in Plato's philosophy,

Leupp's association by namesake amounts to surrendering on one of antiquity's most profound thinkers - and a cornerstone of Islamic, Judaic, Christian and Atheist civilizations. Moreover, in pointing out the tension between Socrates, as supposedly incarnating an individualist freedom, and Plato as the contemptor of democracy, Leupp, in the manner of John Ralston Saul, completely elides mentioning the fact that the little we do actually know about Socrates largely comes from Plato's writings and the mise-en-scene in which his mentor is cast.

When they did not found scientific domains, Plato's contributions touched on beauty, love, ontology, ethics, mathematics, criticism of mythology and state religion, education, transmigration of the soul, and the list goes on. Plato gave philosophy one of its defining forms. It was at once instrumental in ushering in monotheism while also providing all the tools to undermine future dogma in any religion. And prior to becoming the source of 'Western' philosophy, Plato was quite a part of the East and of Islam, though to a lesser degree than was Aristotle. Most papyrus manuscripts of Plato's vast work, including perhaps the enigmatic 'esoteric' texts, would have already been damaged or destroyed when Athens was sacked and Aristotle's library looted by the Romans in 86 B.C. It is said to have been the greatest library of its time in Greece.

One thing Plato was not is a historian. Only a bare minimum of his texts, many of them formally reflecting the dialectical method of philosophical debate, are philosophical tracts. His early writings are a form of thought-theatre. Non-narrative and non-dramatic, they point to an attempt at transmitting what, in all aspects, seems to have been a very active intellectual scene in Athens in the fifth century B.C. Once contemporary readers free themselves from the hegemony of the Oxbridge stranglehold on translated classical texts, they will plunge into the bantering world of political conceptual invention.

At the center of that world lives Socrates, the man of night, the obsessive debater, the lover of thought. Socrates may have been condemned to death for corrupting the youth, among other things, but Plato embraced the man he barely knew in an attack against the restored Athenian democracy that forced him to drink hemlock. It was only in the twilight of Plato's life, in *The Laws*, that he indirectly acknowledged the danger of the Socratic social stimulant. Until then, Socrates was the main actor on Plato's mind stage, whose role was to smash tepid trials in political rhetoric and bind justice to political organization.

As many scholars have pointed out, Athens was a far cry from contemporary democracies. Let the stress be placed on contemporary because it's only in the decades since WWII, and mainly in the decade of the 1960s so despised by Allan Bloom and his proto-neocon students, that full voting rights were finally achieved in Western democracies. Athens was only a semblance of democracy according to contemporary standards. Still, historical knowledge assures us of its complexity. It was a budding experiment: "it is true that we are called a democracy, for the administration is in the hands of the many and not of the few" - notwithstanding the fact that citizenship, even under Pericles's so-called reforms, granted voting rights only to men, but by no means to all of them. These fragmentary beginnings of democracy should not leave us resting on our laurels in our own sense of superiority. After all, European and American civilizations grew ever so slowly in their democratic evolution given the historical knowledge its thinkers had already acquired on freer political systems. Bringing democracy to the state we now know it as came about through people's militias - not foreign invading armies.

Was Plato profoundly anti-democratic or even totalitarian? A cursory reading of Karl Popper's extremely influential *The Open Society and its Enemies* would certainly suggest that. But one of the great failures of Anglo-American scholarship has been the historical omissions involved in not making sense of Plato's attention to the political collectivities from which our individualist passions repel us as if from what is most contrary to our essence. To put it bluntly, if Plato diminished democracy as a valid form of government, he was rejecting the failure of Athenian democracy as based on its real history, and the irreparable damage it wrought on the city.

Recall that Athens, despite its political experimentation, was an expansionist, imperialist city-state, almost permanently at war. It had colonies along the modern-day Turkish coast of the Aegean. It strove to gain hegemony over the Greek city states. And it drove itself into economic collapse through a fratricidal war against Sparta. Before its fall, pestilence had filled the city to claim hundreds of lives, including that of Pericles who was at once the spirit of greater democracy and a relentless wagger of war. The belligerent democracy then went belly up with a coup d'etat led by oligarchic families. Democracy did indeed lead to tyranny, but from its own internal undoing.

Plato came from one of the stakeholding families in the dictatorship that ensued. There is no evidence he ever legitimized the short rule of the Council of Thirty. From his letters, scholars have been able to speculate that his rejection of democracy in *The Republic* on the grounds that it only leads to tyranny is precisely a reaction to the belligerence and unending warfare that characterized the short existence of Athen's first democratic experiment in the Classical Age. The construction of the ideal state, governed by the so-called philosopher-kings along an aristocratic model, i.e. rule by the "best" as the Greek word echoes, is a dismantling of the failures of both types of regimes.

The world had not yet known the possibilities of 19th century democracy. Yet we still swim so very far - as the current national security state proves - from the shores of a fuller, non-belligerent version of 'rule of the people by the people'. Despite the rights gained by all citizens to vote, many democracies, including that of the US, are faltering. Is it therefore legitimate to keep the term sacrosanct merely for want of having to accept ordinary language philosopher John Austin's verdict that "democracy for instance [is among] a few notorious words the uses of which are always liable to leave us in real doubt about what is meant"?

What the neo-cons are not are philosopher-kings. Had they learnt anything from Plato and ancient Greece it would have been that waging an unending string of wars was a paranoid compulsion whose end is only to destroy democracy. Moreover, prior to the pre-emptive strike doctrine they espouse, many neo-cons were active in establishing dictatorships to crush the 'Marxist-inspired' popular uprisings during the 1970s - a legacy well described in various articles published by CounterPunch, and whose 'defensive' character is highly contestable to say the least.

So before dumping one of our greatest political teachers, Plato, we should realize that it is as important as ever to read his work, and read it in the historical context established by French thinkers such as Paul Veyne, Francois Chatelet and Jacques Ranciere.

It should also be recalled that Allan Bloom in *The Closing of the American Mind* put special blame for the shift in American ways toward radical popular and democratic civic demands upon an entire generation of German Jewish intellectuals who fled Nazi Germany to finally

find their abode at the New School for Social Research and Princeton, among other universities.

These Jews were clearly brought up in reading Kant, Weber, Freud and especially Marx. Many of them were Marxists, or, like Adorno and Marcuse, would soon be redrawing the entire landscape of Marxist thought and radical political philosophy. The crisis depicted by Bloom can of course be seen as one pitting conservatives against Marxists. But given the backdrop of Israeli expansionist policies, the context of a settling of scores within the American Jewish community itself should not be ruled out. The vehemence of Bloom's attack on Arendt and Marcuse is peculiar only to a deep desire to cleanse. He stamps them as foreign to the American way - which in reality was only a more recent form to what his ancestors had embraced as immigrants.

The German Jewish intellectuals were only the latest stream of émigrés to arrive in North America, but few such streams have had as explosive an effect on political and cultural life. The youth Bloom was educating consisted of the young Jewish lions ready to undo the teachings of their forefathers, though not to distance themselves from their explosive method. Whereas grandfather Strauss was their perfect guide, parting a space in thought as intellectuals are prone to do, it appears as though Wolfowitz long ago decided to transfigure him through power politics.

Neoconservatism is the final conquest of the Republican Party movement begun with Barry Goldwater uttering in 1964: "I would remind you that extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice! And let me remind you also that moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue!" He was the leading light of the Protestant Fundamentalist movement being ushered into political adolescence whose self-righteous ambitions felt no need for euphemisms. They resound like distant thunder when faced with today's newspeak.

Conversely, neoconservatism spells victory against Jewish intellectuals who were instrumental in the movement that shaped the policies of Itzak Rabin and the Oslo peace accord. Since Rabin's assassination, the neo-cons have sealed their dominance over progressive forces in Israel, those inclined to stop and reverse the illegal settling of the Occupied Territories and give Palestinians the right to an independent homeland.

It has not been repeated enough how important a role the neo-cons have played in the Israeli rightwing. Their battle against Palestinian self-determination has aimed specifically at Jewish progressives, and Bloom's book performed the archeological re-writing of the importance the German Jewish émigrés had for the greatest period in American art and intellectual culture perhaps since the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Due in large part to their contributions, that period was infinitely freer because infinitely more egalitarian than the USA of today. It was a time in which people strove for more democracy and greater equality. Under fictitious pretexts, we are now living the opposite under the same names. The so-called freedom and democracy Bush's neo-cons are pumping is something that both America and the world can live without.

These are some of the reasons why the Strauss/Bloom background has to be spread about some more both within the university walls and from without. Large parts of the American population have been spruced by religion to listen to the neo-con message in order to soothe their impending nightmares. That its power is a perverted outgrowth from social science theory is given an outstanding portrayal in the following article. Giving proper credit is but a

pittance in exchange for deeper knowledge of the advancing plan to redesign the Middle East and reinforce Israeli extremism, as Iraq slides further into confusion.

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