Leo Strauss & Straussianism

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PLSC 330b/598b

Course Description:

Leo Strauss (1899-1973) was one of the most influential political philosophers of the last century and this is the first class ever offered at Yale that will deal exclusively with his thought and influence. Strauss was highly controversial during his lifetime and the debates over his ideas and his legacy have only deepened in the years after his death. His writings have attracted passionate defenders and equally passionate critics. His name itself has become an ism: “Straussianism.” Who was Leo Strauss and what did he stand for?

There is considerable disagreement over the nature of Strauss’s achievement even among those most intimately acquainted with his work. His attempt to revive the famous “quarrel between the ancients and the moderns” led many to wonder whether his loyalties were more with the world of ancient philosophy and politics than with modernity. His writings on the theme of what he called metaphorically “Jerusalem and Athens” led some to question whether his commitments were to the theistic tradition of revealed law or to secular forms of rationality. His recovery of the tradition of esoteric writing has led many to speculate on whether his own writings conveyed a secret teaching intended for those initiated into the art of “careful reading.” And his concern with the problems created by the modern philosophy of relativism and value neutrality has led many to wonder about Strauss’s politics. Was he a secret Platonist attempting to educate a new generation of philosopher-kings or a liberal democrat seeking to rescue democracy from its most dangerous excesses?

Among the themes to be covered in the course are: Strauss's life and intellectual trajectory as a young German intellectual of the Weimar period; the role of Zionism and the "Jewish Question"; the discovery of esoteric writing; the analysis and critique of the "modernity problem"; the theme of "Jerusalem and Athens"; the role of classical political philosophy; his critique of the social sciences. We will also consider Strauss’s influence on the creation of a school and its influence on the understanding of American politics.

Texts:

Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (NRH)
Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (PAW)
Leo Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy and Other Studies* (WPP)
Leo Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (LAM)
Leo Strauss, *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism* (RCPR)

Requirements:
The class will be conducted as a seminar so attendance and participation are key. Each student will write three papers of 7-8 pages each. You also have the option of writing a single research paper of approximately 25 pages.

Outline:

I. Introduction

II. How Did Strauss Become Strauss?
   “Preface to Spinoza’s ‘Critique of Religion’” (LAM)
   “A Giving of Accounts” (packet)

III. Strauss’s “German Problem”
   “Remarks on Carl Schmitt’s ‘The Concept of the Political’” (packet)
   “German Nihilism” (packet)
   “The Living Issues of Postwar German Philosophy” (packet)

IV. The Discovery of Esotericism
   “Exoteric Teaching” (RCPR)
   “Persecution and the Art of Writing” (PAW)
   “On a Forgotten Kind of Writing” (WPP)

V. Esotericism in Practice
   “Farabi’s Plato” (packet)
   “How to Read Spinoza’s ‘Theologico-Political Treatise’” (PAW)

VI. The Critique of Historicism
   “Political Philosophy and History” (WPP)
   “NRH, Introduction and chap. 1”
   “On Collingwood’s Philosophy of History” (packet)

VII. The Return to the Ancients
   “On Classical Political Philosophy” (WPP)
   “What is Political Philosophy” (WPP, pp. 9-40)
   NRH, chaps. 3-4

VIII. The Modernity Problem
   “What is Political Philosophy (WPP, pp. 40-55)
   NRH, chaps. 5-6

IX. Reason and Revelation
   “Jerusalem and Athens” (packet)
   “Progress or Return” (RCPR)

X. Strauss and the “Jewish Question”


"Why We Remain Jews" (packet)

XI. The Critique of the Social Sciences  
NRH, chap. 2  
"An Epilogue" (LAM)  
"Social Science and Humanism" (RCPR)

XII. Liberal Education and Democracy  
"Liberal Education" (LAM)  
"Liberal Education and Responsibility" (LAM)

XIII. Strauss and Straussianism  
TBA

**Recommended Works:**

Other works by Strauss:

*Philosophy and Law: Essays on Maimonides and his Predecessors*  
*On Tyranny*  
*Thoughts on Machiavelli*  
*The City and Man*  
*Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*

Below is a small sample of some recent work on Strauss that you may wish to consult.

**Books and Anthologies:**

Nasser Behnegar, *Leo Strauss, Max Weber, and The Scientific Study of Politics*  
Kenneth Deutsch, ed. *Leo Strauss, the Straussians, and the American Regime*  
Shadia Drury, *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss*  
Robert Devigne, *Recasting Conservatism*  
Laurence Lampert, *Leo Strauss and Nietzsche*  
Heinrich Meier, *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss: The Hidden Dialogue*  
Thomas Pangle, *Leo Strauss: An Introduction to his Thought*  
Eugene Sheppard, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile*  
Steven B. Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss: Politics, Philosophy, Judaism*  
Daniel Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography*  
Alan Udoff, ed. *Leo Strauss’s Thought*  
Catherine and Michael Zuckert, *The Truth About Leo Strauss*
Articles:

Mark Lilla, “Leo Strauss: The European” and “The Closing of the Straussian Mind,”
   *New York Review of Books*, October 21 and November 4, 2004
Robert Pippin, “The Unavailability of the Ordinary: Leo Strauss on the Philosophical
   Fate of Modernity,” *Political Theory* 31 (2003)
Nathan Tarcov, “Philosophy and History: Tradition and Interpretation in the Works of
   LS,” *Polity* 16 (1983)