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Liberal Democracy in Crisis:
Strauss's Rethinking of Political Philosophy

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Abstract

The origination of this thesis emanated from an intriguing research query: "What steps can be taken to comprehend and mitigate the influence of populist movements on contemporary liberal democracies?" In particular, this thesis aims to grasp and examine populism in the United States by utilizing the Trump era as a paradigm. Although there is a wealth of literature on this topic, significant gaps in our understanding of populism remain. Therefore, this thesis aims to contribute to the existing body of knowledge by offering a novel perspective on the subject through the lens of a renowned German philosopher, Strauss (1899—1973), who spent a considerable amount of time in the United States and provided insights into the crisis of modern democracy, including his observations of similar extremist phenomena during the rise of Hitler through democratic means in the Weimar Republic.

The opening chapter of this thesis delves into several sections that explore Strauss's philosophical views on modernity, which are crucial in comprehending his position on democracy. The main emphasis of this chapter lies in Strauss's assessment of the adverse outcomes of modernity, which have resulted in the disempowerment of modern citizens. Consequently, this weakened population is susceptible to manipulation by extremist figures. Furthermore, this chapter delves into Strauss's arguments concerning the role of elites in liberal democracy as well as the impact of technology on politics from both classical and modern perspectives.

In the Second chapter, the focus shifts to the societal response to Strauss's theories. The media and American intellectuals levied charges for elitism and an anti-democratic stance against him, creating a stir of controversy. This chapter offers an equitable and unbiased examination of these allegations, scrutinizing them objectively and scholarly.

In the third chapter of my analysis, I delve into the intricate phenomenon of populism, scrutinizing it from different angles through the lens of Strauss's thoughts. I then delve deeper into the claims that Strauss' ideas have provided a theoretical basis to support Trump, exploring the possible correlation between the two. In the final section, I present my argument on Strauss's possible imagined stance toward Trump if he was alive. Finally, I discuss the relevance of the question of how we can avert potential future surges in populism.

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Introduction

In recent times, democracy has encountered several obstacles, primarily due to the emergence of populist movements throughout Europe. The ascent of these far-right populist figures, who have garnered substantial support, is a cause for alarm. This wave of populism has also made its way to the United States, as evidenced by President Trump's election and his rumored candidacy for the 2024 election following President Biden's term in office.

Moreover, the closing chapter of Trump's presidency was marred by alarming scenes of his supporters storming the Capitol to demonstrate against the election results. This disturbing phenomenon threatens the fundamental principle of respecting election outcomes in a major liberal democratic nation.

As a result, it is imperative to re-evaluate modern liberal democracy and interpret the current populist wave. However, in order to avoid repeating what has already been written on the subject, this thesis aims to explore this issue through the lens of Leo Strauss's legacy. Strauss's philosophy is similar to the allegory of the person who emerged from Plato's cave to glimpse reality, Strauss viewed the world from a distinct philosophical perspective, using classical frameworks to cast new light on the challenges facing modernity and liberal democracy.¹

Strauss (1899—1973) was a German political philosopher who lived through the crisis of democracy during the rise of Nazism. He witnessed how extremist leaders such as Hitler came to power through democratic means. Strauss also studied and analyzed the works of ancient and modern philosophers, including Machiavelli, Hobbes, Nietzsche, and Plato. His thought-provoking ideas on modernity, esoteric writings, democracy, the relationship between elites and the masses, historicism, positivism, and liberal education sparked numerous debates during his lifetime and continue to be relevant today. Therefore, it is highly valuable to analyze his perspectives on modernity, liberal democracy, and populism. ²

¹ Plato. (1908). *The Republic*, The Colonial Press, Book VII, pp. 209-213.

² Smith, S. B. (2009). *The Cambridge Companion to Leo Strauss*. Cambridge University Press. p 1.

The introductory chapter of this thesis delves into Strauss's philosophical views regarding modernity, which are crucial for grasping his stance on democracy. This chapter comprises multiple sections, but its primary focus is on the deleterious effects of modernity, which has led to the debilitation of modern citizens. This weakened citizen becomes vulnerability within liberal democracy, which extremist leaders can exploit under the guise of representing the majority. Furthermore, this chapter explores the role of elites in liberal democracy, along with the impact of technology on politics from classical and contemporary perspectives.

The second chapter delves into societal reactions to Strauss's ideas. American intellectuals and the media accused Strauss of being anti-democratic and elitist, which stirred up a lot of controversy. Hence, this chapter presents a balanced and impartial analysis of these allegations, examining them objectively and scholarly.

In the third chapter, I analyze the phenomenon of populism through the lens of Strauss's thoughts. I then investigated the claims that Strauss's ideas have provided a theoretical basis to support Trump. Finally, I present my argument on Strauss's possible imagined stance toward Trump if he was alive. I conclude by discussing the validity of the question of how we can prevent any potential future waves of populism.

Chapter one

Leo Strauss's Response to the Crisis of Modernity: Liberal Education and the Future of Democracy

To gain a comprehensive understanding of Leo Strauss' take on democracy, one must examine his assessment of modernity. Strauss posits that both liberal democracy and communism emerged during the First and Second stages of modernity. As a result, this section will commence with a succinct overview of modernity, followed by an in-depth analysis of Strauss's critiques and viewpoints on modernity, highlighting six pivotal elements. Finally, it scrutinizes his convictions regarding democracy and liberal education. ³

1. Leo Strauss's argument of modernity

Leo Strauss argued that modernity is in crisis because people in the West have lost their ability to differentiate between what is good and bad, right and wrong. Science has made great progress in human life, making people believe in it. However, the downside of this belief is that value judgments are considered illusions or unscientific. In other words, scientific knowledge is limited to factual judgment. In this section, I provide a brief description of modernity from Strauss' perspective. I will then delve into critical debates such as the value judgments problem, modernity and technology, and ideologies in modernity. ⁴

Beginning with the brief description of modernity, Leo Strauss does not see modernity as one block but he classified it into three waves. The First Wave, initiated by Machiavelli, includes other political philosophers such as Spinoza, Hobbes, and Locke. Strauss characterized the philosophers of this wave as thinkers who try to take the political philosophy from the ideal moral model of the classic to reality. ⁵

³ Strauss, L. (1960). *The Three Waves of Modernity*. p 98.

⁴ Strauss, L. (1960). *The Three Waves of Modernity*, pp. 81-82.

⁵ Zuckert, C. H., & Zuckert, M. P. (2008). *The Truth about Leo Strauss*. University of Chicago Press, pp.68-68.

Starting with Machiavelli, classic philosophy aims to discover the best political order. This ideal regime would be guided by virtues and natural rights, which would ultimately lead to the best regime and best human behavior. Classical thinkers believed that this type of regime could only come by chance when philosophy and politics cooperated in leadership. Unfortunately, politicians rarely seek guidance from philosophers, who are often considered enemies of society. Machiavelli, credited with bringing political life into practice, argued that virtue is not innate in society, but rather developed for its benefit. Society creates its own virtues.⁶

Regarding the best regime, Machiavelli believed that a good political society cannot be established by mere chance, as suggested by classics. Rather, he asserted that the primary motivation for leaders to establish such a society is their passion for glory. In the subsequent sections, we delve deeper into this concept and examine its implications.⁷

Although Machiavelli's ideas were groundbreaking in political philosophy, his work required simplification, as Hobbes provided. Hobbes agreed with the classical notion that virtues are not solely determined by society; he also asserted the existence of natural rights. However, he concurred with Machiavelli that traditional political philosophy aimed too high.

In his argument about the establishment of society, Hobbes rejected Machiavelli's perspective that glory is the main focus, and instead believed that the fear of death is what creates the foundation of society. He believed that natural rights are derived from basic needs, such as self-preservation, rather than from the pursuit of perfection or an ultimate goal, as claimed by classical philosophers.⁸

The second wave is inspired by Rousseau and includes some early philosophers of history, such as Hegel and Marx, as well as their intellectual forerunners Kant. Rousseau and his assumptions were highlighted by Strauss as follows:

⁶ Strauss, L. (1960). *The Three Waves of Modernity*, pp. 84-86.

⁷ Strauss, L. (1958). *Thoughts on Machiavelli*. The free press, pp. 286-288.

⁸ Strauss, L. (1960). *The Three Waves of Modernity*, p 88.

Rousseau was against Hobbes's interpretations of self-preservation as a motive and a major reason for the formation of society. Instead, he supposed that the public will was the cornerstone of the formation of society and laws. However, he acknowledged that society requires traditional virtues and natural rights, such as self-restraint, courage, loyalty, and steadfastness, to defend itself against external threats. Otherwise, citizens who prioritize their self-interest over the common good may find self-sacrifice to defend their motherland costly or unworthy.⁹

Rousseau rejected ancient solutions to political problems. According to ancient philosophers, the political problem lies in reconciling duties and inclinations, civil society, and selfishness. The ancient solution to this problem was to have a wise legislator with some Socratic skill to convince people to adapt and respect the law through rhetoric. Therefore, they prioritize the law and public good over their direct interests in some cases written in the law.¹⁰

Rousseau was against this solution because it threatens the freedom and sovereignty of the people. He believes that individual consent is crucial and does not accept the manipulation of citizens through wise rhetoric under the justification of the public interest.

The third wave, initiated by Nietzsche through his rejection of many ideas, came out by second-wave thinkers. Rousseau believed that while the historical process improved humanity, it also diminished the natural goodness and sentiment of existence in people. Thus, he concluded that the best solution to the human situation would be for those who still appreciated the sweetness of existence to turn away from civilization and its discontent. On the other hand, Nietzsche rejected Rousseau's idea of the existence of sentiment and instead believed that it was an experience of terror and distress. He also

⁹ Strauss, L. (1960). *The Three Waves of Modernity*, pp. 89-92.

¹⁰ Drury, S. (2006). *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss*, Updated Edition. Springer, p 158.

dismissed Rousseau's notions of the humanization of human beings through historical processes. ¹¹

In the shadow of this general and short presentation of Strauss' classification of modernity waves, the following section investigates Strauss's arguments and critics of modernity.

1.1 Positivism and historicism in modernity

As mentioned previously, Strauss supposes that the dialectical development of political philosophy led to three waves of modernity. One of the important outcomes of these three waves led to two controversial schools of thought, positivism and historicism, which are the main arguments in the following section.

Starting with positivism's main ideas, positivism considers the practical scientific method to be the most reliable approach for acquiring knowledge. Hence, positivism distinguishes between facts and values, limiting scientific treatment to the former. Moreover, positivistic social science claims that political science should be value-free or ethically neutral, thereby denying the possibility of objective value judgments. ¹²

Strauss rejects the idea of understanding thought or action without evaluating it. When we are unable to evaluate this adequately, we have not yet succeeded in an adequate understanding. Hence, Strauss asserts that having value-free political science is impossible because political science inherently distinguishes between political things and things that are not political; therefore, he presents his assumption in two arguments.

First, this distinction mentioned previously presupposes that political scientists answered the question of "what is political." What is political is related to politics, and is thus related to the state. A state cannot be defined without defining its constitution or laws. Moreover, defining the purpose of a society or state is compulsory in defining this state. Defining all of these concepts leads scientists to realize and understand concepts and values, such as freedom, equality, and justice. By defining the state, or rather civil

¹¹ Zuckert, C. H., & Zuckert, M. P. (2008). *The Truth about Leo Strauss*. University of Chicago Press, p 69.

¹² Strauss, L. (1953). *Natural Right and History*. University of Chicago Press, pp. 16-17.

society, with reference to its purpose, one admits a standard in light of which one must judge political actions and institutions. ¹³

Second, the notion of rejecting value judgments stems from the belief that human reasoning cannot effectively resolve conflicts that arise between various values or value systems. However, Strauss claims that this belief has never been proven, but what has been seen are superficial observations that pretend that this or that value conflict is insoluble. ¹⁴

Strauss simplified his explanation with an example. "But if we cannot decide which of two mountains whose peaks are hidden by clouds is higher than the other, cannot we decide that a mountain is higher than a mole-hill?" If we cannot differentiate between two states that have been fighting each other for years to determine which is more just, how can international organizations, such as international courts, work? ¹⁵

Strauss argues that there can be no political action without a value paradigm or judgment. He clarifies that the ultimate purpose of such a political action is either to maintain the status quo or to bring about change. Preservation aims to prevent the situation from deteriorating, whereas change aims to improve it. In both cases, the underlying motivation was a desire for a better outcome. This process of preserving or changing toward better outcomes cannot happen without value judgment to have an idea about what is good to preserve and what is bad to change. ¹⁶

Strauss emphasizes that invisible value judgments occur, but they are not seen or neglected by observers. For example, scientists engage in the act of making value judgments, while differentiating between democratic and authoritarian systems. In their discussions, they delve into which political systems are superior and establish standards to assess the degree of freedom that citizens are entitled to, based on liberal Western norms.

¹³ Strauss, L. (1957). *What is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies*. University of Chicago Press, 22.

¹⁴ Strauss, L. (1957). *What is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies*. University of Chicago Press, p 22

¹⁵ Strauss, L. (1957). *What is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies*. University of Chicago Press, pp.19-23.

¹⁶ Strauss, L. (1957). *What is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies*. University of Chicago Press, pp.10-11.

Consequently, Strauss asserts that establishing and organizing a society cannot happen without having values system and guidelines for this society. For example, citizens respect the policeman because they represent the state and the law; therefore, it is impossible to have policemen or the executive branch in society without having a law or constitution, which includes codes that seek or are guided by values such as right, wrong, good, bad, public interest, and privacy. However, the dilemma of this argument is how society can adopt these values, which is the core argument of Strauss with the historicism school. ¹⁷

The philosophical concept of historicism asserts that knowledge is not absolute or universal but rather shaped by historical and cultural circumstances. This perspective rejects the idea of objective truth and emphasizes the importance of understanding the social and cultural contexts in which knowledge is produced. In addition, historicists believe that human history is not a meaningless sequence of events but rather a meaningful and purposeful process with its own logic and direction. ¹⁸

Strauss was against historicism school and he supposes that it is more dangerous than positivism. He disputed the idea that determining what is just should be based on an agreement between society's legislators and courts. It is clear nowadays that people could claim that the decision issued by this court is incorrect or unfair, and sometimes judges oppose the judgments of other judges issued in the past. Consequently, according to Leo Strauss, what is just cannot be determined by the agreement of the whole society or representatives of the majority in parliament. Instead, he claimed that the rules and norms established by society come from natural or positive rights. ¹⁹

Some argue that there is a higher standard of right and wrong than positive right, and that these standards come from the ideals of society. Strauss denied the idea of ideals of the society too because he believe that it leads to the same problem. He illustrated this point by referring to cannibal societies as an example of how relying solely on local principles could potentially lead to negative consequences. The principles of cannibal society are accepted by local citizens and institutions, but the majority of human beings

¹⁷ Strauss, L. (1957). *What is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies*. University of Chicago Press, p 16.

¹⁸ Strauss, L. (1953). *Natural Right and History*. University of Chicago Press, p 12.

¹⁹ Strauss, L. (1953). *Natural Right and History*. University of Chicago Press, pp. 2-4.

oppose these principles because they believe that they are not right. Therefore, according to Strauss, agreement between a specific local group and specific cultures is insufficient.²⁰

In addition to the criticisms mentioned above, Strauss claims that historicism undermines the possibility of political philosophy. Political philosophy, either in class or modern thought, aims to determine the best way and system to organize society, but if all thoughts are historically conditioned, then there is no best way to organize society because what is good or best differs from time to time and from society to society.²¹

In addition, Strauss asserts that historicism's ideas lead to relativism and nihilism. If there are no universal truths, there is no way to judge one political system or ideology as better than the other. Therefore, all values are equally worthy and there is no stable ground for evaluating political systems, ideas, and behaviors.

Finally, Strauss argues that historicism is self-refuting. He points out that historicism itself is a product of history; therefore, it is subject to its own claims. If all thought is historically conditioned, then the thought of historicists is also historically conditioned, and therefore, it cannot be true.²²

1.2 Modernity and virtues

The classic philosophy was oriented by what should be, not what it is; in other words, they tried to follow ultimate moral goals that orient the society actions. By contrast, as mentioned previously, Machiavelli and other contemporary political theorists tend to prioritize practical considerations and what can realistically be accomplished. According to Leo Strauss, Machiavelli claimed "There is no superhuman, no natural, support for justice. All human things fluctuate too much to permit their subjection to stable principles of justice. Necessity rather than moral purpose determines what the sensible course of action is in each case".²³

²⁰ Strauss, L. (1953). *Natural Right and History*. University of Chicago Press, P 3.

²¹ Thomas L. Pangle (1989), *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism :An Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss*, the University of Chicago press, p. xxix.

²² Strauss, L. (1953). *Natural Right and History*. University of Chicago Press, pp.30-31.

²³ Strauss, L. (1953). *Natural Right and History*. University of Chicago Press, pp. 178-179.

First, Machiavelli argues that virtues are not by nature, as the classics supposed, but can only be gained and practiced through the societal processes of education, customs, and legal limitations. Second, classic philosophers argue that virtues are the guidelines and ends of a society's acts. However, Machiavelli claimed that virtues are the means for the ultimate end, which is the public good. In other words, according to Machiavelli, defining the good of society cannot be by virtue, but defining virtues must be in terms of the public good. ²⁴

Strauss cited Nietzsche's critics of modernity's outcomes. Nietzsche claims that modernity created "the Last man" a human being caring about normal and direct needs such as having a nice modern house, last editions of new technology, a decent job, and the ability to get their children into good schools. This realistic perspective produces a weak version of a human who does not care morally and politically about society's goals.

This case of self-interest orientation is bad for society because society cannot be established without a general paradigm that outlines what is good, bad, right, wrong, and loyalty, and all these concepts should be prioritized by citizens in a situation such as war or any public crisis.

Strauss frequently said that you cannot respect the policeman for example who represents the law and state without having in mind concepts such as Law, justice, state, and constitutions. Therefore, this paradigm is compulsory for creating and preserving society. ²⁵

1.3 Modernity as a way to the ideological conflicts.

Strauss believes that modern political philosophy is less united than classic one. To clarify his ideas, Strauss indicated that modern political philosophy was always in a loop of revision. As mentioned previously, Machiavelli's ideas required clarification through Hobbes's reading and editing. In addition, Hobbes could not provide an

²⁴ Strauss, L. (1957). *What is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies*. University of Chicago Press, pp. 40-42.

²⁵ Strauss, L. (1957). *What is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies*. University of Chicago Press, p 16.

adequate version of political philosophy that was generally acceptable; thus, Hobbes's works were criticized and revised by other philosophers who came after him. ²⁶

According to Leo Strauss, modern reality and extreme political systems were the outcomes of modernity's political thinking. Where these loops of revision created waves of modernity, first-wave thinking inspired liberal democracies. Communist movements were created in the second wave, which included Marx. The third wave inspired Fascism through Nietzsche's ideas. ²⁷

Hence, Strauss has many observations of modernity because all ideological conflicts, such as the Cold War, capitalist and communist competition, and fascist political systems within WWII, are outputs of the intellectual context of modernity. However, Strauss does not deny that intellectual conflicts are unavoidable in political life, whether in modern or pre-modern political life. Nevertheless, it is notable that these conflicts are maximized after modernity because modern conflict has intellectual ground.

To provide more clarity, the competition between the USSR and the USA was not solely for resources, as it was during the colonial period. Rather, it was an ideological conflict stemming from differing opinions of economic and political issues.

Furthermore, the technological advancements in modernity led to an unprecedented level of escalation of the conflict, potentially resulting in the use of nuclear weapons by both sides on multiple occasions.

1.4 The Quest for Universalism in Modernity

Strauss argues that the West and modernity have another crisis because of the West's ultimate purpose. Strauss understood the purpose of the West is creating a universal prosperous society embracing equally human beings. However, the history of human beings is full of antagonistic relationships between humans and nations; thus, the West's

²⁶ Zuckert, C. H., & Zuckert, M. P. (2008). *The Truth about Leo Strauss*. University of Chicago Press, pp.67-70.

²⁷ Strauss, L. (1960). *The Three Waves of Modernity*, p 98.

and some modern thinkers' goal of having a peaceful universal system is an idealistic idea.²⁸

Strauss argues that this vision of a universal system is dangerous because it could lead to perpetual tyranny. Strauss claims that many extremist political regimes- that are considered outputs of modernity such as communism and Nazism- seek to achieve their vision of having a universal system, which means a tyrannical universal system. Hence, there will not be any safe place for philosophers and thinkers to present their arguments about freedom and other values. In addition, it is a dangerous world for any opposition to this tyrannical universal system because there is no safe place for them to express their opinions without fear of punishment.²⁹

Strauss does not prefer Even a universalistic system under a democratic system. He criticizes the American vision of having democracy everywhere, which is based on the assumption that democratic systems do not fight against each other, where it seems an idealistic or inapplicable idea to have one model for all nations and cultures.³⁰

1.5 The shadow of technology and modernity.

The aim of science and technology is to liberate human beings from the control of nature, thereby improving human life by saving human time and maximizing human abilities to achieve their goals. However, this liberation process has adverse side effects, such as human control over each other in a way that is harmful to humanity.³¹

This negative side can be seen in governments' use of technology to censor or supervise their citizens. It was also clear during the two world wars that some states were using technology to eliminate and erase other nations and their citizens. Hence it is easy to see what Strauss feared- also the classic philosophers before him- about having a technology out of the control of the moral values paradigm .³²

²⁸ Zuckert, C. H., & Zuckert, M. P. (2008). *The Truth about Leo Strauss*. University of Chicago Press, pp.71-72.

²⁹ Strauss, L. (1953). *Natural Right and History*. University of Chicago Press, p 23.

³⁰ Zuckert, C. H., & Zuckert, M. P. (2008). *The Truth about Leo Strauss*. University of Chicago Press, pp.71-72.

³¹ Zuckert, C. H., & Zuckert, M. P. (2008). *The Truth about Leo Strauss*. University of Chicago Press, pp.71-72.

³² Strauss, L. (1953). *Natural Right and History*. University of Chicago Press, pp. 28-29.

Classic philosophers suppose that evilness is a part of the world (political life), but some modern thinkers such as Kant believe in the possibility of having “perpetual peace”. Strauss adopted the classic point of view and argues that this evilness and the perpetual possibility of war are more harmful and dangerous when conjoined with technology. In other words, as mentioned before, the communist ambitions of having a universal homogenous state were a nightmare for Strauss because he was afraid of the availability of technology in the hands of such an authoritarian state.³³

The ideas of classic philosophers and Leo Strauss about moral limitations in technology have sound logic; nevertheless, the problem is more complicated. As Strauss said, to know and evaluate anything you should know its aim, the technology aims to make human life easier through the control and invasion of nature. Accordingly, the ultimate goal of technology is to maximize benefits to society and save human time and effort. Hence, the moral paradigm is not part of the technology's aim, and the problem that arises in putting the ethical paradigm is reducing creativity and productivity, which leads to the loss of many products that are useful to human life, even morally.

To clarify more, inventing cars is good for saving human time and effort, but it harms other humans who do not have cars by car accidents or emissions from cars that destroy the environment and human health. In the meantime, cars are useful from an ethical perspective when they become ambulances to save human life in a limited time or when they transfer aid to citizens under war circumstances or natural disasters such as earthquakes.

My argument is not against the moral or ethical limitation to the dangers of the technology, but also it is necessary to ensure that this limitation does not limit the positive part of the technology, which could be effective even morally, as mentioned in the previous example. In addition, it is recommended to increase moral limitations in the militaristic industry, which may pose a danger to human life. However, the dilemma remains the following argument: is it possible to separate technological development in

³³ Strauss, L. (1953). *Natural Right and History*. University of Chicago Press, p 23.

civilian fields from military ones? For example, nuclear energy may be useful in terms of providing energy, but access to this knowledge has been used militarily.

1.6 Modernity and nihilism

Strauss argues that the West and modernity crisis was because the West had fallen under control of the nihilism and Nietzsche's ideas. Nihilism implies that all values and ends are worth equally or meaningless. In other words, there are no values that are better or worthy than others; therefore, human beings cannot differentiate between good and evil because there are no high measures to guide their behaviors.

According to Strauss, the problem of having equal worth for values is dangerous because healthy societies should believe that their values and ideals are superior to those of other societies; thus, these superior values are worthy of sacrifice. Strauss supposes that the West's citizens believe that their values are not superior; thus they do not sacrifice, die, and fight for their society's values, which lead to the decline and deterioration of their civilization.³⁴

2. Leo Strauss's View of Democracy

In light of our reading of Strauss's criticism of modernity, let us delve into his views on democracy. Strauss agreed with Rousseau that for a democratic system to function properly, it requires the presence of high-quality citizens. To be more precise, Rousseau argued that "If there were a people consisting of gods, it would rule itself democratically. A government of such perfection is not suitable for human beings." However, Strauss believed that democracy is the best available system, as it can be modified and allows intellectuals and philosophers to improve society. Therefore, in the following section, I present Strauss' controversial arguments about democracy.³⁵

2.1 Democracy between classic and modern political philosophy

Leo Strauss, a renowned scholar, carefully examined contemporary political and philosophical dilemmas through the lens of classical philosophy. Despite the fact that ancient philosophers were not proponents of democracy, they acknowledged its

³⁴ Drury, S. (2006). *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss*, Updated Edition. Springer, P 161.

³⁵ Burns, T. W. (2021). *Leo Strauss on Democracy, Technology, and Liberal Education*. State University of New York Press, P 18.

advantages. Here, the Socratic example suffices; it is true that Socrates was killed by a democratic country, but that happens when he was 70 years old. Therefore, he was permitted to live and act freely for the age of 70, indicating that the democratic system was not completely bad. So, some may question why classic philosophy rejects democracy, despite being aware of its advantages.³⁶

Strauss argues that the problem lies in the different ultimate goals of classic philosophers compared to modern philosophers. The classic philosophy supposes that the aim of human life, and hence of social life, is not freedom, but virtue. The classic had a cautious attitude towards freedom and considered it an ambiguous value because it was freedom from evil and for good.³⁷

Furthermore, the concept of democracy in classical times differs significantly from that of modern democracy in several ways. One of the main differences lies in the economic aspect, where the classical economy was characterized by scarcity, leading to the rule of the majority by the poor and uneducated. Classic philosophers opposed such a system of rule by unqualified people, while the modern economy is far more abundant because the modern world emancipates technology from political and moral controls.³⁸

In terms of education, classics believed that virtue was acquired through education and habituation, which required leisure and wealth for the child and family. As a result, the majority in classic democracy, i.e. the poor, did not have the opportunity to receive a good education to qualify them for holding high positions and rule.

Socially, the democracy of Athens was characterized by the presence of slavery and citizenship was a privilege, not a fundamental right as in modern liberal democracy. Therefore, the modern idea of equal citizenship for everyone led to an increase in the

³⁶ Strauss, L. (1957). *What is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies*. University of Chicago Press, pp. 35-36.

³⁷ Strauss, L. (1957). *What is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies*. University of Chicago Press, p 36.

³⁸ Strauss, L. (1964). *The City and Man*. University of Chicago Press, p 36.

number of participants in the democratic process, which ultimately led to the creation of a representative democracy rather than the Athenian direct democratic model. ³⁹

It is important to note that, in both classic and modern democracies, high positions are usually filled by elites. This is because those in higher positions often have the privilege of being chosen by the people due to their intellectual qualifications, social networks, and other skills.

Therefore, it is indeed the responsibility of the majority to distinguish between good and bad representatives or elites. However, it is important to note that the rise of extremist or unsuitable elites is a result of flaws in society's educational and political systems. This means that there is a problem with the overall cultural and intellectual context in countries where such elites come to power, and this is not solely the fault of the majority of voters.

For example, the rise of Hitler to power in Germany was not solely due to the mistakes made by the majority. There was a significant problem in Europe following the aftermath of World War I. The German people feel persecuted and oppressed by many European countries. This raises questions about whether, in the normal situation in Germany at that time, the majority would have elected Hitler.

On the other hand, freedom is a priority in modern political thinkers' perspectives, but still there is strong criticism of majoritarianism. Strauss highlights that the current modern democracy suffers from "mass democracy". Furthermore, a considerable number of modern scholars argue that majority rule is not always good, because the majority may not be fully qualified or informed about complex political and economic issues. ⁴⁰

In light of previous ideas, it is important to recognize that human output in the political and social sciences are never perfect. Therefore, it is not expected to last a decade without any critique of reality. Every political system either classic or modern has flaws, and philosophers play a crucial role in identifying and critiquing them to promote progress. However, it should be emphasized that criticism should not be viewed as a

³⁹ Strauss, L. (1964). *The City and Man*. University of Chicago Press, p 35.

⁴⁰ Burns, T. W. (2021). *Leo Strauss on Democracy, Technology, and Liberal Education*. State University of New York Press, P 1.

negative aspect but rather as a fundamental element in the pursuit of growth and advancement.

2.2 Societal Hierarchies and democracy

The classical view is that hierarchy is natural, and should reflect in society and politics. In other words, they assume that human beings have different capabilities based on innate, social, and economic status. Hence, classic philosophers claim that the most qualified men to rule come from the high-ranked class in society because they are experienced in noble and beautiful things that average men cannot experience. This high quality of breeding and experience requires leisure from parents and children, which requires a considerable amount of wealth to meet their needs in the educational process.⁴¹

Meanwhile, the classic was not blind to the injustice of ruling by a privileged group, where it closed the door for anyone from poor families, regardless of their capabilities and efforts. However, the classic accepted this injustice because they supposed that the alternative was chaos or the rule of mass. ⁴²

Classic thinkers accepted this case, privileged people rule, because they took for granted that the characterization of the economy in the city would always be under economic scarcity; therefore, they did not imagine that our modern political systems would offer a good quality of education for everyone, regardless of wealth. ⁴³

It is important to clarify that classic philosophers build their arguments based on their model of direct democracy, but currently the democratic structure is not the same. Thus, citizens vote on decisions directly in classic democracies, but in modern liberal democracies, citizens vote for choosing representatives.

⁴¹ Strauss, L. (1957). *What is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies*. University of Chicago Press, pp. 36-37.

⁴² Strauss, L. (1957). *What is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies*. University of Chicago Press, pp. 36-37.

⁴³ Burns, T. W. (2021). *Leo Strauss on Democracy, Technology, and Liberal Education*. State University of New York Press, PP. 5-6.

Hence, modern liberal democracy distinguishes between voting processes, which are characterized by equal rights for all citizens, and the right to be a representative that needs qualifications. These qualifications are easier for citizens from rich and elite families to reach, but poor citizens still have the chance to obtain them. The main difference between classic and modern democracy is that good quality of education is available for everyone; therefore, everyone can gain competence regardless of their social status or economic background.

2.3 The Limits of Majority Rule

It is known that decisions in modern liberal democratic systems are made by the majority; however, the majority of competencies have been criticized by different philosophers, either classic or modern. Strauss, influenced by Nietzsche, argued that modernity softened modern citizens and made them less qualified to make decisions. As a result, politicians and the media can easily manipulate the majority. ⁴⁴

According to Strauss, democracy is vulnerable, and cannot protect itself. Although the goal of modern liberal democracy is to achieve freedom, it can sometimes restrict citizens' freedom. Strauss used Hitler as an example to explain how democracy and the majority can be manipulated by a charismatic leader to restrict freedom. Furthermore, Hitler's manipulation of the majority led to World War II and the deaths of approximately 50 million people. ⁴⁵

Strauss was not the only philosopher who argues about the majority, there are many other philosophers such as Tocqueville. He was known for his belief in the potential tyranny of the majority, which he did not view as entirely positive. Instead, he anticipated that majority rule would be a flawed model, citing the following reasons for his stance.

First, the main justification for majority rule is that a vast number of citizens are more intelligent and wise than a single citizen. However, Tocqueville refused that assumption and claimed that " If it is admitted that a man, possessing absolute power, may misuse

⁴⁴ Zuckert, C. H., & Zuckert, M. P. (2008). *The Truth about Leo Strauss*. University of Chicago Press, p 66.

⁴⁵ Zuckert, C. H., & Zuckert, M. P. (2008). *The Truth about Leo Strauss*. University of Chicago Press, p 66.

that power by wronging his adversaries and may make wrong decisions, why should a majority not be liable to the same reproach".⁴⁶

In this passage, Tocqueville considers how citizens make decisions and choose their representatives, and how conflicts between public and private interests can influence their decision-making. When citizens prioritize their private interests over the public good, it creates an environment where radical leaders can manipulate the majority and focus on their own interests, even if it is detrimental to the public interest. This is why political speeches by populist and extremist politicians targeting minorities and immigrants can be effective in appealing to the majority's private interests.

This conflict between private and public interests is also highlighted in Strauss's reading of classic philosophers. They consider the political problem of their time to be how to reconcile duty and inclination, civil society, and selfishness. The classic philosophers' solution to this problem is to have a wise legislator who convinces the people through obfuscation and clever rhetoric to adopt his code, but it is clear that the problem of conflict between the private and public good is still a huge problem in politics and society.⁴⁷

2.4 Democracy and technology

Strauss's vision of modern democracy cannot be detached from his argument about technology. He argues that "the difference between the classics and us with regard to democracy consists exclusively in a different estimate of the virtues of technology." The classics predicted that the emancipation of technology and arts from moral and political control would lead to a disaster or the dehumanization of man.⁴⁸

Understanding the emancipation of technology can be clarified through the controversial debate between productivity and moral limits. The classic preferred to control technology and arts with moral limits, but currently, priority is given to

⁴⁶ Maletz, Donald (2002), *Tocqueville's Tyranny of the Majority Reconsidered*, the University of Chicago Press, p 755.

⁴⁷ Drury, S. (2006). *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss*, Updated Edition. Springer, p 158.

⁴⁸ Strauss, L. (1957). *What is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies*. University of Chicago Press, pp. 37-38.

productivity and market needs as drivers of technology, regardless of the negative moral and ethical effects. ⁴⁹

This technology-led emancipation led to the Industrial Revolution, changing the structure of societies. The Internet's increasing availability of information and knowledge has a huge impact on the political and economic dimensions. Society is no longer divided between servants and masters, as it was in the classical era. As a result of this emancipation, many modern ideas and ideologies have emerged, such as liberal democracy, capitalism, and communism.

Meanwhile, the problem of economic scarcity is a dependent variable on the emancipation of technology. As previously mentioned, this emancipation led to abundance after the appearance of machines and an increase in productivity. However, Strauss, influenced by classic philosophers, argued that an increase in productivity leads to an increase in destructivity and dehumanization. There are many examples of the relationship between productivity, destructivity, and dehumanization in modern politics, such as nuclear weapons and the government's use of technology for censorship. ⁵⁰

2.5 Greatness in democracy – aristocracy in democracy

Strauss claims that democracy can be exploited by some politicians to achieve their individual goals through his argument about greatness manifesting on behalf of freedom in Churchill's example. Although Churchill defended the democratic world from the dangers of Nazism and was considered a hero for defending freedom, Strauss analyzed his behavior from different dimensions.

First, Churchill had to react under the pressure of necessity. Second, some readers of Strauss' work, such as Timothy W. Burns interpreted Churchill's behavior as reacting, driven by the desire for personal greatness. Thus, the label defended democracy, but in reality, this case cannot be understood without considering Churchill's' desire for personal greatness and glory. ⁵¹

⁴⁹ Strauss, L. (1957). *What is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies*. University of Chicago Press, pp. 37-38.

⁵⁰ Strauss, L. (1957). *What is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies*. University of Chicago Press, p 37.

⁵¹ Burns, T. W. (2021). *Leo Strauss on Democracy, Technology, and Liberal Education*. State University of New York Press, pp. 23-24.

Strauss highlights this greatness issue historically in his reading of Machiavelli's work through his book about what is political philosophy. According to Strauss, Machiavelli argues that humans do not seek virtue by nature, as the classic philosophers supposed, but he believes that people seek virtue through society's educational system. In other words, Machiavelli said that no one is born patriotic or seeks virtues, but society teaches people these virtues; thus, virtues can only be practised in society. Here, we must wonder who educates society on virtue. Who educates the educator? ⁵²

Machiavelli answered that morality is created by immorality, where the leader of the state – even if he is a bad man—seeks to make his citizens good and follow moral values, because this will be important for organizing society. Organizing society is important for development, which is personal success for leaders. Hence, Machiavelli supposes that passion for glory or greatness drives the leader to build an educational system for educating people about virtues and making them good citizens, even if he is a bad man.⁵³

In the shadow of this case of glory and greatness, Strauss proposed his argument about aristocracy within democracy as part of his project on liberal education, which I will review and analyze in the following section.

2.6 The Western Model of Democracy

Strauss warns that positivism transforms itself into historicism and following historicism affects the Western vision of reality, Strauss argues that the approach of Western research in studying other cultures is flawed as it relies on a modern Western conceptual framework that fails to capture the true essence and significance of those cultures. This suggests that there is a need for a more nuanced approach that takes into account the unique perspectives and values of those cultures in order to better understand them. ⁵⁴

⁵² Strauss, L. (1957). *What is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies*. University of Chicago Press, pp.42-43.

⁵³ Strauss, L. (1957). *What is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies*. University of Chicago Press, pp.43-44.

⁵⁴ Strauss, L. (1957). *What is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies*. University of Chicago Press., pp.22-23.

The aforementioned sentence draws attention to the Iraq invasion by the United States and its allies from Western states. These countries believed that Western liberal democracy could transform Iraq into a perfect society. However, it has been proven that this assumption was incorrect.

3. Leo Strauss project of liberal education

In the shadow of his arguments about democracy and modernity, Strauss seeks to present a solution to deal with the shortcomings of modern liberal democracy. He emphasizes the importance of his project, liberal education, in various places. This chapter will focus on two of his important works, "What is Liberal Education?" and "Liberal Education and Responsibility", to gain a comprehensive understanding of his ideas about this project.

3.1 Leo Strauss's View in his article "what is liberal education?"

Strauss presents his criticism of modern liberal democracy as a regime that stands or falls through virtues such as wisdom and justice. However, he argues that modern liberal democracy is deficient in these virtues. In Strauss's view, modern democracy is almost a mass democracy controlled by a mass culture that comprises citizens who read nothing except football news and comic pages. ⁵⁵

As mentioned earlier, Strauss shares Nietzsche's view that mass culture is a consequence of modernity. Therefore, he contends that a society controlled by mass culture lacks the necessary tools to support stable democracy over a prolonged period of time. Moreover, this type of citizen and culture could have hazardous consequences for democracy, such as voting for extremist leaders. ⁵⁶

Strauss believes that in order to counteract the negative effects of mass culture and develop capable citizens, it is necessary to establish a liberal education. He argues that "liberal education is the path we take to rise above mass democracy and reach true

⁵⁵ Strauss, L. (2004). What is liberal education? *Academic Questions*, 17(1), 31–36.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12129-003-1046-2>, p 313.

⁵⁶ Zuckert, C. H., & Zuckert, M. P. (2008). *The Truth about Leo Strauss*. University of Chicago Press, p 66.

democracy." In other words, liberal education promotes an aristocratic society within the democratic system. ⁵⁷

In his speech, Strauss asserted that liberal education's ultimate product is cultural human beings. He gives the example that the human mind is like the soil that needs to be cultivated. However, finding a good teacher is not as easy as finding a farmer. The teachers themselves are students, and must be students to learn every day. Such cases are extremely rare in men.

According to Strauss, the method of education he advocates is not the usual one. He claims that liberal education can only be attained by connecting with the thinking of the great minds by reading their books. This type of reading is not ordinary but a careful way of reading to properly comprehend the great books left behind by the greatest minds. Strauss believes that many books contain superficial opinions meant for the casual reader, but also have deeper opinions that can only be appreciated by careful readers and experts.

Strauss asserts that the purpose of reading great books is not to read about thinkers and their ideas in their era, but by reading them, a person acquires a certain style of critical thinking that promotes civil responsibility. In other words, the aim of such reading is not merely to share or accumulate information, but to develop the qualities of a true gentleman. ⁵⁸

Strauss bolstered the credibility of his project by infusing it with quotes from classic philosophers Socrates and Plato. Socrates Said "Just as others are pleased by a good horse or dog or bird, I myself am pleased to an even higher degree by good friends. . . . And the treasures of the wise men of old which they left behind by writing them in books, I unfold and go through them together with my friends, and if we see something good, we pick it out and regard it as a great gain if we thus become useful to one another". Moving to Plato's compatibility with Strauss's perspective, Plato claims that the highest level of education is philosophy. Philosophy seeks wisdom or a quest for

⁵⁷ Strauss, L. (1962). Liberal Education And Responsibility, pp.323-324.

⁵⁸ T. U. O. C. (2011). UnCommon Core | Leo Strauss on Liberal Education. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sTWBwSc4qjE> .

knowledge of important and comprehensive things. Philosophizing commences by listening to the debates of great philosophers, which have been left in their books. ⁵⁹

3.1.1 Challenges in the way of liberal education

When it comes to reading great books, there are two main obstacles to consider. First, we have to be careful when reading books written by great minds, since they do not always agree with each other. In fact, they often have many arguments and contradictions among themselves. In the meantime, we should put these arguments into dialogues to analyze them and find our way through these readings, considering that there is no one can claim that he knows the absolute truth or his argument is the true one.

Engaging in dialogue among great minds poses a significant challenge in two aspects. First, it is difficult to differentiate between them and to comprehend the logic behind their arguments. In other words, it is challenging to determine who is correct in a debate. Additionally, all dialogues, including Platonic dialogues, occurred between superior and inferior individuals. Even great philosophers such as Plato acknowledge the difficulty of having a meaningful dialogue between two exceptionally brilliant minds. If Plato and other great philosophers know that it is difficult to have a dialogue between the two great and high minds, it means that it is hard for us to do so too. ⁶⁰

In addition, are we qualified enough to judge these great minds' ideas, considering the differences between our age and their age? These temporal differences can cause confusion regarding the meaning of a text, leading to various interpretations, even for the same reader across different ages. Additionally, readers may have their own context in mind, which can lead them to try to impose their own beliefs on the text. Therefore, the process of acquiring liberal education through reading important books can be challenging to accomplish.

Second, Strauss pointed out that reading great book as a way to achieve liberal education comes with another set of difficulties. Liberal education is typically conducted within a specific cultural context, which in this case is Western. However,

⁵⁹ Strauss, L. (2004). What is liberal education? *Academic Questions*, 17(1), 31–36. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12129-003-1046-2>, P 316.

⁶⁰ Strauss, L. (2004). What is liberal education? *Academic Questions*, 17(1), 31–36. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12129-003-1046-2>, P 317.

this culture is not all-encompassing, and it would be a huge mistake to confine ourselves solely to our own cultural perspectives. ⁶¹

Strauss added that by limiting ourselves to Western minds, do we not condemn liberal education to a kind of parochialism. We risk narrowing the scope of liberal education and failing to cultivate open-mindedness implied by the term. In the meantime, concentrating only on Western culture will lead to the loss of the magnitude of knowledge that has been left in great books out of the Western dimension. ⁶²

3.2. Leo Strauss's View in his article "liberal education and responsibility"

Strauss began his paper regarding liberal education and responsibility by defining what he means by responsibility, also how can he define and explain liberal education. Starting with the word "responsibility," Strauss asserted that it is a common word that is used with vulgar meaning, where its fashionable substitute is words such as duty, conscience, or virtue. Although Human beings always consider a responsible person as a virtuous man or a just man, Strauss argues that there is a difference between the word responsibility and other virtuous meanings. ⁶³

Strauss argues that a responsible man is the man who is accountable for his actions. For example, in the case of a crime, the murderer is responsible for his actions, but this does not mean that he is a virtuous or just man. Strauss believes that responsibility is a condition or indicator to measure whether a man is either virtuous or vicious. ⁶⁴

Second, Strauss clarified his argument about the word 'liberal' through his criticism of modern reality. According to classical philosophers, being liberal means being a free person, or, in other words, someone who is not enslaved. A slave is someone who lives solely to serve others and does not have a life of their own; they put in their best efforts towards their master's affairs, and all revenues belong to their master.

⁶¹ Strauss, L. (2004). What is liberal education? *Academic Questions*, 17(1), 31–36.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12129-003-1046-2>, P 317.

⁶² Strauss, L. (2004). What is liberal education? *Academic Questions*, 17(1), 31–36.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12129-003-1046-2>, P 312.

⁶³ Strauss, L. (1962). *Liberal Education And Responsibility*, p 322.

⁶⁴ Strauss, L. (1962). *Liberal Education And Responsibility*, p 322.

Strauss criticized modernity and its outcomes, where there are many free men but they live almost like slaves because they work the majority of their time, under circumstances of modernity and capitalism. Hence, Strauss argues that these free men without leisure are poor (the majority), so he asserts that the truly free man is the man who has leisure.

Turning to the word "education", Strauss defines education as primary education, not adult education. In other words, this kind of education builds the character of humans and helps them acquire administrative and political skills through direct education, reading great books, or by taking part in political life. As mentioned previously, this type of primary or royal education is more accessible to rich families who have leisure and wealth. Therefore, Strauss's model gave an essential role to gentlemen, where they have all the conditions needed to rule society. ⁶⁵

The paragraph above raises questions about the justice of society. It argues that giving high positions to gentlemen is unjust because while they may be superior in breeding, the majority of men are capable of the same if given the opportunity from a young age. Therefore, birth is the only factor that determines whether someone has a chance of becoming a gentleman or villain, making aristocracy unjust. ⁶⁶

In response to criticism, gentlemen argued that it is not possible for the city or state to provide such a high-level education to everyone, as it would only be possible in an idealistic world. In addition, Strauss and the classics argue that this case of preferring gentlemen comes from the natural hierarchy. They assert that these condemnments came from a narrow vision of justice fueled by the ignoble passion for envy. ⁶⁷

Catherine and Michael Zuckert presented a counterargument against the idea of natural hierarchy. They argued that, even if we were able to identify natural talent and provide equal opportunities for everyone, there would be no guarantee that talent would be

⁶⁵ Burns, T. W. (2021). *Leo Strauss on Democracy, Technology, and Liberal Education*. State University of New York Press, P 37.

⁶⁶ Thomas L. Pangle (1989), *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism :An Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss*, the University of Chicago press, p 53.

⁶⁷ Strauss, L. (1962). *Liberal Education And Responsibility*, p 325.

inherited across generations. Weak children can be born to good parents, and individuals with great natural abilities can come from humble backgrounds.⁶⁸

I believe that the answer to this argument is neither black nor white. In other words, in the modern world, where the private sector plays a significant role, education is no longer solely guided by public or political entities. Instead, many private organizations are now participating in the educational processes. As a result, aristocratic families can still offer high-quality education to their children, which give them a higher possibility of obtaining high positions in the future. Meanwhile, with advancements in technology, Internet, and scholarships, knowledge is now available to almost everyone. Therefore, I assert that factors such as individual effort can play a significant role in determining the outcomes.

Furthermore, if the goal is to prevent the perpetuation of aristocratic privilege in modern times, the debate should focus on the role of the private sector in society. Can we remove this entirely, especially in education? If so, to what extent can society remain liberal while removing every effort except that of the government?

In the final point of the gentleman's issue, Strauss highlights a problem between gentlemen and the common people. He argues that it is difficult for gentlemen to be accountable in front of people because of the distance between them. The gentlemen consider virtue as a worthy choice in itself, while the common people view it as a means to acquire wealth and honor. This fundamental difference makes it impossible for genuine deliberations to occur between the two groups. Therefore, gentlemen are unable to provide a sufficient or clear explanation of their way of life to common people.⁶⁹

In his argument about the superiority of gentlemen over ordinary citizens, Strauss highlights the higher ranking of philosophers over gentlemen, even if the philosopher does not directly rule the state. Hence, Strauss clarifies some differences between them:

⁶⁸. Zuckert, C. H., & Zuckert, M. P. (2008). *The Truth about Leo Strauss*. University of Chicago Press, p 130.

⁶⁹ Burns, T. W. (2021). *Leo Strauss on Democracy, Technology, and Liberal Education*. State University of New York Press, PP 38-39.

Gentlemen cannot come from poor status, but the philosopher may be poor, as can be seen in Socrates's life and example. ⁷⁰

As long as it is not crucial for philosophers to be rich, he does not need the laws art, which is needed for the gentlemen to rule and make new laws, by which one defends one's property. Gentlemen accept the ultimate weighty issues or values which for philosophers are themes of investigation. ⁷¹

Strauss explained the relationship between the gentleman and philosopher by stating that the virtue of the gentleman is a reflection of the philosopher's virtue. The philosopher plays a crucial role in educating the gentlemen and guiding them, especially if they hold high positions in society. This indirect role of the philosopher justifies the rule of gentlemen.

It may seem odd that Strauss gave power to govern gentlemen rather than philosophers. Philosophers are considered to be the best men by nature and education, but they were not given rules. This appears to put the inferior in charge of the superior. Strauss reasoned that philosophers are too busy with their pursuit of knowledge and wisdom, which is a higher-ranking activity that requires constant acquisition of knowledge. thereby, Philosophers cannot fully engage in the act of governing as they would take away from their pursuit of knowledge. Since full engagement in philosophizing means that the philosopher cannot rule, they allow themselves to be ruled by a gentleman. ⁷²

Strauss argues that philosophers are not integral parts of the cities and only exist alongside them. In other words, the philosopher does not play a direct and main political role in society because their ultimate goal is to seek wisdom, which may not be acceptable to the city, as Plato clarified in his allegory of the cave. ⁷³

In this allegory, there is a group of people who have spent their entire lives chained in a cave, facing a blank wall. The only thing they are able to see are shadows being projected on the wall from objects passing in front of a fire behind them. However, these shadows are not an accurate representation of reality.

⁷⁰ Strauss, L. (1962). *Liberal Education And Responsibility*, p 328.

⁷¹ Strauss, L. (1962). *Liberal Education And Responsibility*, p 328. ⁷²

Strauss, L. (1962). *Liberal Education And Responsibility*, p 329.

⁷³ Strauss, L. (1962). *Liberal Education And Responsibility*, pp. 329-330.

One day, one of the prisoners is set free. He is forced to turn around and leave the cave, entering the real world. Initially, he is unable to see anything due to the bright sunlight, but eventually his eyes adjust and he is able to see the world as it truly is. The freed prisoner decides to go back to the cave and share his experience with the other prisoners. However, they do not believe him, thinking that he has gone mad and that the shadows on the wall are the only reality.

This allegory serves as a metaphor for the human condition. We are all like prisoners in the cave, chained to our senses and believing that the shadows on the wall are the only reality. The philosopher in this story is like the freed prisoner who has escaped the cave and experienced the real world.

Therefore, philosophers are often not valued by society because their ideas may differ from commonly held beliefs. It is important for philosophers to remain focused on their pursuit of wisdom and avoid becoming too involved in political life. Otherwise, they may be compelled to follow unjust laws and even face punishment, as is the case with Socrates in Athens.

Strauss argues that he and philosophers are not adversaries of democracy or modernity but rather supporters. In the meantime, he clarifies the significant role of philosophers in society, especially in the modern world, which is affected by market and capitalist goals. According to Strauss, in today's world, science and technology hold the most powerful authority and are widely recognized. Philosophy has been replaced with science as a master. However, science is incapable of distinguishing between good and evil ends, as discussed earlier regarding value judgment and science. Therefore, it cannot justify the ends for which the means are sought. In practice, science is obliged to satisfy the ends sought by its customers, the society to which the individual scientist belongs, and often the masses. Hence, the philosophers play an important in debating with a common orientation toward market demands ⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Thomas L. Pangle (1989), *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism :An Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss*, the University of Chicago press, p 10.

Strauss concludes his argument on liberal education by emphasizing an important point. He clarified that not all graduates of liberal education have the same political beliefs or sense of responsibility, even though it is intended to be a comprehensive form of education. For instance, Karl Marx, the founder of communism, and Friedrich Nietzsche, a key figure in the development of fascism, were the products of liberal education, beyond what most of us can imagine. However, one can argue that the failures of some individuals or groups make it easier for those who have experienced these failures to understand the old saying that wisdom cannot exist without moderation.⁷⁵

In conclusion, Leo Strauss was a thinker with a complex and controversial philosophy. Nevertheless, his thoughts on modernity, liberal democracy, and liberal education are still relevant in today's world. While Strauss acknowledges that modernity and liberal democracy have deficiencies, he believes that the democratic system is still the best political system available, and its shortcomings can be addressed through discussion and his model of liberal education. To fully grasp Strauss's ideas, it is essential to consider his experiences of democracy in American politics. Therefore, the following chapter will examine the second part of Plato's allegory by discussing how the city received Strauss' ideas and the criticisms leveled against him and his intellectual legacy.

⁷⁵ Strauss, L. (1962). *Liberal Education And Responsibility*, p 344.

Chapter Two

Challenging Leo Strauss: Key Criticisms of His Ideas and Their Consequences

After sharing Strauss's controversial ideas, it is crucial to analyze societal responses to Strauss's divisive concepts following their dissemination. Typically, philosophers and their respective societies exhibit a tumultuous relationship often characterized by hostility. Strauss is an embodiment of Nietzsche's observation that autonomous philosophers are frequently not a product of their era. Such individuals are typically regarded as rebellious agitators, who are shunned and rejected by their contemporaries. Although this may not have been entirely accurate for Strauss during his lifetime, his ideas were heavily scrutinized and condemned by many intellectuals and media outlets after his death.⁷⁶

These condemnations peaked during and after the 2003 Iraq War, when he was accused of inspiring many neoconservative politicians in the Bush administration. These condemnations were not baseless, as Strauss's controversial views on various topics caused division among his audiences. Furthermore, his unique method of reading and perhaps writing, known as "esotericism," made it difficult for many to fully understand his thoughts. This resulted in disagreements over how to interpret his ideas, and some of his opponents even coined the term "Straussian" as a way to label his supporters. However, as time passed, many students who had studied and embraced Strauss's ideas came to accept this label.⁷⁷

Building on previous discussions, this chapter delves into the debates and disagreements between proponents and opponents of Strauss's thoughts. It assesses three main objections to Strauss's beliefs that originate from different intellectuals. However, the central theme of this chapter is the critiques made by Shadia Drury. Drury was Strauss's major critic, and her criticism was the primary focus of the chapter. Drury's criticism

⁷⁶ Pangle, T. L. (2006). *Leo Strauss*. JHU Press. p 1.

⁷⁷ Zuckert, M. P. (2009). *The Cambridge Companion to Leo Strauss*. Cambridge University Press. pp. 263-264.

centers around Strauss's views on Esotericism and "The Noble Lie", his leaning towards elitism and anti-democratic values, and his impact on American foreign policy.

1. Strauss's Esotericism and the Noble Lie: Between Deception and Education

1.1 Critics of Strauss's Esotericism

Drury describes Strauss as a notable scholar who wrote commentaries on significant political thinkers throughout history, including Machiavelli, Plato, Socrates, Hobbes, and Spinoza. Strauss posits that these great thinkers use an esoteric style of writing, meaning that they conceal their true thoughts within their works. Therefore, Strauss tries to read between the lines and uncover the hidden truths in these books. He proposed new methods for interpreting these esoteric works, such as placing emphasis on the number of chapters or paragraphs within them. ⁷⁸

In the meantime, Drury believes that Strauss is an esoteric writer too. However, she reckons that Strauss uses an unfamiliar way of esotericism. She claimed that Strauss did not clearly express his true thoughts in his books, nor did he put his ideas between the lines. Instead, he used his commentaries on other philosophers to convey his message through their words. ⁷⁹

Drury mentions that Strauss extracted this style from Farabi as the originator of this particular form of art. Strauss admired Farabi's understanding of Plato's works and believed that Farabi's interpretation of Plato's texts provided a glimpse into Farabi's own ideas. He was particularly impressed with how Farabi crafted speeches that were similar to those of Plato. ⁸⁰

To support her argument, she cited the concept of the "Noble lie" and "pious frauds" as fundamental to discover the true political philosophy of Strauss. In his book "What Is Political Philosophy?" Strauss asserts that truth can be found within the lie, and

78 Drury, S. (2006). *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss*, Updated Edition. Springer. p. x. 79

Drury, S. (2006). *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss*, Updated Edition. Springer. p. x. 80

Drury, S. (2006). *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss*, Updated Edition. Springer. p. 27.

references Farabi's tale of the pious ascetic to illustrate the cryptic nature of Plato's writings. ⁸¹

The pious ascetic is renowned in his city for his exemplary morals. However, he unexpectedly became the target of hostility from the city ruler who ordered his arrest. To prevent his escape, the guards were stationed at the city gates. Despite this, the ascetic managed to flee the city by disguising himself as a drunkard and playing a tune on the cymbals as he approached the city gate. When the guard asked him to identify himself, he claimed to be a pious ascetic being searched for. The guard was doubtful but eventually allowed him to leave.

Drury claims that the pious ascetic is the old depiction of an esoteric writer. The esoteric writer lies in the style or way of expression, but does not lie in content. In addition, Drury also posits that Strauss is similar to the pious ascetic and employs this technique under the guise of "Noble lies." She argued that Strauss presented his radical ideas in a disguised or cunning manner to conceal their true nature. These ideas would only be revealed to his trusted followers, who would then implement them in a political reality.⁸²

To prove her assumption, Drury asserts that Strauss acknowledged his status as an esoteric writer in his book "On Tyranny." In this book, Strauss suggests that the wisdom of a thinker's work is not immediately apparent and must be sought out in the appropriate sections. ⁸³ Furthermore, Strauss comments on his work, saying that commentaries on Great Books should follow the writing styles of these books. ⁸⁴

1.2 Drury's approach of interpreting Strauss esotericism

After proving her assumptions, Drury clarifies her approach to interpreting Strauss's esoteric writings. She emphasized that she would only take what was directly written and did not infer any hidden meanings. Additionally, she stated that she would not

81 Strauss, L. (1988). *What is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies*. University of Chicago Press. p. 135.

⁸² Drury, S. (2006). *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss, Updated Edition*. Springer. p. x.

⁸³ Strauss, L. (2013). *On Tyranny*. University of Chicago Press. pp. 27-28.

⁸⁴ Drury, S. (2006). *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss, Updated Edition*. Springer. p. 6.

contradict Strauss's explicit beliefs and claim the opposite. In other words, she did not misrepresent his ideas. ⁸⁵

However, Drury argues that uncovering Strauss' esotericism poses a challenge because of his ambiguous use of certain key concepts. For instance, his concepts of virtue, justice, nobility, and gentlemanliness have multiple meanings depending on the context in which they are used.

For instance, Strauss adopts the characters 'The Just' and 'The Unjust Speech' from Aristophanes's *Clouds*. The 'Just' and 'Unjust Speech' symbolizes Justice and Injustice, or Right and Wrong, and they participate in a competition to win over a young man's soul through their speech. Strauss frequently employs the term 'Just Speech,' even when Aristophanes is not involved in the context. Thus, according to Drury, when Strauss uses these concepts, he primarily refers to justice and injustice as a matter of speech or a way of thinking that is not substantiated by any universal reality independent of man. ⁸⁶

In addition, Drury argues that Strauss' writing style, which involves commenting on great books, poses a challenge in interpreting his complex works because it requires distinguishing between his political ideas and the original author's ideas. In simpler terms, understanding Strauss's work is impossible without knowing his interpretation of intellectual figures and the ideas he attributed to them. ⁸⁷

For example, when reading Strauss' commentaries on classic Greek philosophers, such as Plato and Aristotle, it is crucial to acknowledge that his comprehension of them is influenced by Islamic and Jewish thinkers' perspectives. This may result in different interpretations and evaluations compared to those based on Western lenses. ⁸⁸

It's not just Drury who thinks that Strauss writes esoterically; there are others who share this belief, including Allan Bloom, one of Strauss' renowned students. Bloom categorizes Strauss's body of work into three periods. The first period was characterized

⁸⁵ Drury, S. (2006). *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss, Updated Edition*. Springer. P lix.

⁸⁶ Drury, S. (2006). *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss, updated edition: With a New Introduction By the Author*. Springer. p. xi.

⁸⁷ Drury, S. (2006). *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss, updated edition: With a New Introduction By the Author*. Springer. p. 9.

⁸⁸ Drury, S. (2006). *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss, updated edition: With a New Introduction By the Author*. Springer. p. 9.

by Strauss interpreting clear ideas, with his personal touch being almost non-existent. During this period, Strauss had not yet discovered esoteric writing, so he functioned primarily as a historian, rather than a political philosopher. Some of his works from this period include Spinoza's Critique of Religion and Political Philosophy of Hobbes. ⁸⁹

During the second period, Bloom noted that Strauss made notable advancements in his approach to studying great books. In particular, he began to delve into the concept of 'esoteric writing', which allowed him to uncover hidden meanings in the works of great philosophers through careful attention to detail. While his writing style remained similar to that of other scholars, his conclusions often contradicted popular opinion. Notable works from this period include Persecution and the Art of Writing, On Tyranny, and Natural Right and History. ⁹⁰

During the third period of his writing, Strauss delved deeper into classic philosopher works. His writing style became more liberated from the constraints of modern scholarship and was aligned with the thinkers of antiquity. This stage is clearly exemplified in his works, including "City and Man," "The Argument and the Action of Plato's Laws," and "Thoughts on Machiavelli." In this period, Strauss also revised some of his previous claims, such as his belief that Hobbes sparked modernity, and instead regarded Machiavelli as the catalyst. ⁹¹

1.3 Strauss's Esotericism: A Critique of the Critics

After analyzing Drury's critiques of Strauss, it becomes evident that she made a mistake in her approach to interpreting his texts. Drury believed that Strauss's writing style was esoteric, which meant that, to fully comprehend his work, it was necessary to utilize the tools of this style. However, Drury chose to employ a conventional method to analyze his texts, which prevented her from fully grasping the subtleties and hidden meanings of Strauss's writing as an esoteric writer. In simpler terms, Drury decided not to read

⁸⁹ Allan Bloom - "Leo Strauss 1899-1973." (n.d.). Scribd. pp. 246.

<https://www.scribd.com/document/555199077/Allan-Bloom-Leo-Strauss-1899-1973>

⁹⁰ Allan Bloom - "Leo Strauss 1899-1973." (n.d.). Scribd. pp. 246.

<https://www.scribd.com/document/555199077/Allan-Bloom-Leo-Strauss-1899-1973>

⁹¹ Allan Bloom - "Leo Strauss 1899-1973." (n.d.). Scribd. pp. 247-248.

<https://www.scribd.com/document/555199077/Allan-Bloom-Leo-Strauss-1899-1973>

between the lines, and instead took direct and clear meanings, which made her miss out on the intricacies of Strauss's writing.⁹²

In reference to Drury's argument on Strauss and the ascetic, she claimed that Strauss was influenced by Farabi's story of the pious ascetic. She asserts that Strauss follows the ascetic's approach of not directly disclosing his true intentions, but rather presenting his genuine arguments in a way that hides his actual beliefs from the general public but unveils them to those who study his work carefully.

However, Drury accuses Strauss's followers of using deceitful lies and false intelligence to manipulate American citizens during the 2003 Iraq War. This is in stark contrast to her previous comparison of Strauss with an honest ascetic who does not lie. where Drury cites an instance of Straussians who implemented their ideas in the Bush administration by lying to manipulate the public.

There should be only one valid option: The first option is that he is not a liar, indicating that he was not associated with the political actions of those who were considered his supporters during the Bush administration. Consequently, there is no connection between Strauss' work and the events that occurred during the 2003 Iraq War.

The second option proposed is that Strauss and his supporters endorsed the idea of using "noble lies" to control the masses. This implies that Drury linked him with an incorrect narrative, the pious ascetic story. Therefore, based on this option, if she was incorrect in assuming Strauss to be a pious ascetic, this raises doubts about the credibility of her analyses in other domains too.

In regards to another argument, Drury suggests that Strauss utilized his method of esotericism as a commentator in great books to speak through their voices. She also attempted to persuade her readers that Strauss used Machiavelli as a mouthpiece. In her own words, "I will demonstrate how Strauss utilized Machiavelli as his mouthpiece" (PILS, 26). What Strauss spoke through Machiavelli, which was previously concealed,

⁹² Zuckert, C. H., & Zuckert, M. P. (2006). *The Truth about Leo Strauss Political Philosophy and American Democracy*. University Of Chicago Press.p 116.

was Machiavelli's opposition to the classic legacy. On the contrary, it is widely known that Strauss is an admirer of classical philosophy.⁹³

In regards to her selection of Machiavelli as the mouth of Strauss, she made a mistake. Machiavelli is not a suitable thinker to represent Strauss' classic legacy, as they hold opposing views regarding the classic legacy. Also, she broke her rule of "never attributing to Strauss any views contrary to his explicit statements." Therefore, unlike her previous assumption of interpreting Strauss, she is now trying to attribute something to Strauss that cannot be believed. Strauss had declared many times his admiration for the classics, which she had noted in her works about him. She previously stated that Strauss presented himself as a classicist. He criticizes the moderns and defends the ancients" (PILS, 61).⁹⁴

It is crucial to investigate whether Drudy's assertions regarding Strauss's writing style are adequately substantiated by evidence. Michael Zuckert claims that Strauss's interpretation of the pious ascetic tale of the Farabi was an attempt to comprehend both Platonic and Farabi esotericism. It is important to note that simply because one interprets a text that he reads in a particular manner does not necessarily mean that the reader must adopt the same approach in his writing. In addition, it is essential to recognize the significant differences between the contexts of Farabi and Strauss.⁹⁵

Discussing Strauss's esotericism and context, Strauss argued that esotericism is often utilized in societies that do not value individual freedoms.⁹⁶ This serves as a means for thinkers to express genuine thoughts without fear of retaliation from political systems or societies. Therefore, it is important to question Drudy about why Strauss would employ esotericism, given that Strauss and his primary audience reside in a democratic country such as the United States of America, which is dominated by liberal ideas.⁹⁷

⁹³ Minowitz, P. (2009). *Straussophobia*. Lexington Books. pp. 226, 228.

⁹⁴ Zuckert, C. H., & Zuckert, M. P. (2008). *The Truth about Leo Strauss*. University of Chicago Press. pp. 117-120.

⁹⁵ Zuckert, C. H., & Zuckert, M. P. (2008). *The Truth about Leo Strauss*. University of Chicago Press. pp. 119, 120.

⁹⁶ Pangle, T. L. (2006). *Leo Strauss*. JHU Press. pp. 72-73.

⁹⁷ Strauss, L. (2013). *Persecution and the Art of Writing*. University of Chicago Press. P. 36.

As we wrap up our conversation about esotericism, one may wonder why Strauss preferred and utilized it to interpret the classic literature. The answer lies in Strauss' opposition to historicism. In his early debates, Strauss challenged the idea of historicism, which claims that all philosophies and philosophers are products of their time. According to historicism, there is no eternal knowledge and all concepts are conditioned by their historical context. However, Strauss rejected this belief, as he believed it undermines the philosophical sciences, as it implies that there is no accumulated knowledge about fundamental concepts such as justice or equality. In other words, this historicist assumption undermines philosophical studies that are based on arguments regarding the main concepts that have been debated by previous philosophers.⁹⁸

Strauss employed esotericism as a means to challenge the underlying assumptions of historicism. In simpler terms, he demonstrated that there are eternal thoughts and the ideas of thinkers transcend their immediate societies. Often, thinkers express their true ideas, which may not be commonly accepted by their societies or governments through esotericism. Therefore, Strauss's ultimate objective was to present case studies of the boundlessness of human thought in the face of historical contexts that are often concealed within great books.⁹⁹

2. Strauss's Elitist and Anti-Democratic Tendencies

2.1 Criticisms of Strauss's Perspective on Democracy

Many thinkers and media have criticized Strauss for being anti-democratic because of his critique of democracy and his ideas about incorporating aristocracy into it. Therefore, it is highly important to delve into the ongoing debate surrounding his beliefs and ideas on this matter.

First, let us clarify Strauss's main postures about democracy; he affirms that he is not an adversary of democracy. He endorsed democracy as the best possible regime. He argues that Plato's anti-democratic stance is exaggerated, and both Strauss and Plato

⁹⁸ Minowitz, P. (2009). *Straussophobia*. Lexington Books. pp. 285, 286.

⁹⁹ Zuckert, C. H., & Zuckert, M. P. (2008). *The Truth about Leo Strauss*. University of Chicago Press. pp. 123, 124.

acknowledge that democracy provides the freedom necessary for philosophical thinkers. However, Strauss has made some observations on democracy, one of them being his criticism of what is known as "mass democracy".¹⁰⁰

To clarify her assumption, Drury began by dismantling Strauss's experiences with democracy. She reckoned that his attitude toward liberal democracy stems from his past experiences in the Weimar Republic of Germany, where Hitler rose to power. This led him to believe that the same type of authoritarian regime could also happen in the United States. ¹⁰¹

Strauss believed that the suffering of the Jews in Germany and the struggles of Socrates and Alcibiades in Athens illustrated how those who were superior were mistreated by those who were inferior in democratic systems. As a result, Strauss concluded that liberal democracy poses the greatest threat to the superior type.

Based on the previous view, Drury claims that Strauss and his adherents believed that Plato's republic in which philosophers rule over the city is the best regime. However, this model is challenging to attain, but not entirely unattainable, as it relies on collaboration between philosophy and politics. Essentially, it necessitates that the philosopher has a strong relationship with the ruler and actively participates in policy-making and decision-making processes. ¹⁰²

Furthermore, according to Strauss, Plato's model is also hard attainable because of the challenging relationship between philosophers and society. He pointed out that there is an inherent conflict between the two groups, which stems from the fact that the assumptions made by philosophers are often at odds with society's values and beliefs. This tension is vividly illustrated in Plato's cave example, which was discussed in the previous chapter.

As a solution for democracy drawbacks, Strauss developed his own model of liberal education, inspired by Farabi's ideas. He believed that political philosophers play a crucial role in preparing exceptional elites through esoteric and exoteric writings. These

¹⁰⁰ Strauss, L. (1988). *What is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies*. University of Chicago Press. p. 313.

¹⁰¹ Drury, S. (2006). *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss, Updated Edition*. Springer.p. xx.

¹⁰² Drury, S. (2006). *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss, Updated Edition*. Springer.p. 16.

elites, known as "gentlemen," would thoroughly read important books to uncover wise ideas and to actively participate in the democratic life. ¹⁰³

Drury's argument towards Leo Strauss's posture from democracy is as follows: she believes that criticizing democracy to enhance it is encouraged to prevent it from falling, but Strauss's belief in incorporating aristocracy into democracy actually undermines the democratic system and can lead to tyrannical elite who believes they have exclusive access to truth and power. Drury points out that while Strauss claimed to adhere to Plato's idea of a philosopher king, his vision is more similar to Nietzsche's concept of the superman but without the latter's compassionate side. ¹⁰⁴

She pointed out that the ghosts of Weimar that haunted Strauss are no longer relevant. She emphasized that modern liberal democracy is a political system that ensures equal rights for all and constitutionally safeguards minority groups. Moreover, the American system has measures in place to prevent power abuse through checks and balances. Drury also noted that we currently live in a democratic era, but this does not mean that excellence, superiority, and human greatness are suppressed.¹⁰⁵

2.2 Strauss's Elitism: A Contested Legacy

As discussed earlier, Strauss places great importance on the role of philosophers and gentlemen in his liberal education project. This indicates that elitism is a fundamental element of his project. Therefore, this section explores the arguments related to this topic.¹⁰⁶

Strauss often receives criticism for being regarded as elitist, but Drury disagrees that elitism has a detrimental effect on democracy. Drury distinguishes elitism as a general phenomenon from Strauss's particular brand of elitism. She believed that elites play an essential role in democratic societies by utilizing their expertise to make informed decisions on complex and critical issues.

¹⁰³ Drury, S. (2006). *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss*, Updated Edition. Springer. p.p 16,28, 29.

¹⁰⁴ Drury, S. (2006). *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss*, Updated Edition. Springer.p. xix.

¹⁰⁵ Drury, S. (2006). *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss*, Updated Edition. Springer. p xx.

¹⁰⁶ A. J. W. (2022). *Leo Strauss - Liberal Education Responsibility*. pp. 328-330. dokumen.tips. <https://dokumen.tips/documents/leo-strauss-liberal-education-responsibility-59018e4d0229b.html>

Moreover, Drury points out that modern elitism is different from traditional aristocratic society. The classical aristocracy was based on inequalities by birth. In a liberal society, inequality is supposedly based on merit, rather than birth. The liberal dream is to have careers open to all talents, regardless of birth. However, this is only a half-truth at best.¹⁰⁷

Drury cited John Plamenatz's example to support her argument about the role of elites in decision-making. Plamenatz imagined a society consisting of 100 men and women who govern themselves through direct democracy. They make all decisions and laws as one body. In this society, 10 individuals are accustomed to doing most of the talking in the assembly. They identify issues and debate the pros and cons of various policies or courses of action. Such informed and intelligent debate can only help bring the issues to light and enable the rest of the community to make more informed decisions or vote more intelligently.¹⁰⁸

In regards to Strauss's elitism, Drury states that Strauss granted privileges to elite over vulgar. Elite are responsible for creating noble lies, whereas vulgar men consume them. Vulgar are primarily motivated by self-interest, pleasure, and wealth. Additionally, they only tend to follow and respect moral virtues out of fear of punishment from the laws ¹⁰⁹

In contrast, elite uphold the moral values of their own volition, rather than being motivated by the fear of external powers, such as the government. They do not require external control to guide them towards virtuous behavior as they are self-motivated. For pleasure, rather than seeking pleasure through basic human needs, such as food, sex, wealth, and power, they prioritize finding happiness through a philosophical way of life.

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The privilege granted to the elite or the wise by Strauss resulted in the formation of a group of Straussians within the American government who employed the concept of noble lies. They deceived the American population by portraying them as masses who were unaware of the actual threat posed by Saddam Hussein and his al-Qaeda allies, the

¹⁰⁷ Drury, S. (2006). *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss*, Updated Edition. Springer. p xiii.

¹⁰⁸ Plamenatz, J. P. (1973). *Democracy and Illusion*. [London] : Longman. pp. 130-131.

¹⁰⁹ Drury, S. (2006). *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss*, Updated Edition. Springer. pp. 193-195.

¹¹⁰ Drury, S. (2006). *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss*, Updated Edition. Springer. pp. 193-195.

militant Islamic terrorist organization headed by Osama bin Laden. The government claimed that Saddam was hiding nuclear weapons, which ultimately led to Iraq's invasion in 2003, resulting in prolonged conflict in a region with a diverse range of ethnicities. ¹¹¹

Drury contends that Strauss's liberal education model led to establish the most radical in the history of Western thought. These elites, also known as neo-conservatives, have been using falsehoods for years and have demonstrated little regard for democratic processes or for the American people. Drury stressed the significance of strengthening democratic mechanisms and upholding the rule of law as the most effective measures to prevent extremist elites, such as the Straussians in the Bush administration, from committing violations. ¹¹²

2.3 Defending Strauss: A Response to Critics of His Elitism and Anti-Democracy

Drury expressed her belief that Straussians, or those who followed the teachings of Strauss, were among the most problematic elites in Western history. This is because she perceived them as a group of like-minded individuals who deviated from mainstream political and academic norms. However, upon closer examination, it appears that they do not necessarily form a cohesive group. As such, there is reason to question the validity and significance of the label 'Straussians' attributed to them. Moreover, even if this label holds true, it is worth considering whether they all share the same mindset when it comes to Strauss's teachings. ¹¹³

To provide further clarification, Zuckert explains that Straussians are divided into various camps and it is unlikely that they will reach a consensus on interpreting Strauss's ideas on many topics. For instance, they were divided into groups to interpret Strauss's comments on religion and morality. The first case of disagreement is Strauss's thoughts about the status of religion (the problem of Athens and Jerusalem), and the second case concerns his thoughts on morality (the problem of Plato and Aristotle).¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ Drury, S. (2006). *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss*, Updated Edition. Springer. p xxiv.

¹¹² Drury, S. (2006). *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss*, Updated Edition. Springer. pp. 193-195.

¹¹³ Zuckert, M. P. (2009). *The Cambridge Companion to Leo Strauss*. Cambridge University Press. pp. 263-264.

¹¹⁴ Zuckert, M. P. (2009). *The Cambridge Companion to Leo Strauss*. Cambridge University Press. pp. 265-284.

Furthermore, as conscientious scholars, it is crucial to accurately define the concepts put forth by Strauss in his work "What Is The Liberal Education?" Strauss stated that "Liberal education is the ladder by which we try to ascend from mass democracy to democracy as originally meant. Liberal education is the necessary endeavor to found an aristocracy within democratic mass society". Hence, Strauss's proposal for a political system combines aristocracy and democracy which means that the elites are not just ruling over the people, but are also part of the democratic process. They present themselves to voters and electors, who ultimately decide if they are qualified to lead the state. Strauss emphasizes the importance of the rule of law, electors, and democratic mechanisms in balancing his proposed system. For this reason, he did not just call for an aristocratic system. Therefore, any attempt to neglect the second part of his expression, aristocracy within democracy, is purposely neglecting an important part of the image.¹¹⁵

Strauss himself acknowledged that using liberal education as a tool to prepare elites doesn't always result in reliable outcomes. In his article on liberal education, Strauss recognized that individuals with liberal education can be either good or bad. This is clear from the examples he used in his observations of Nietzsche's philosophy, the father of fascism, and Marx, the father of communism. Therefore, he always pursued his project within democracy to counteract any extremist elite, even if they possessed liberal education.¹¹⁶

It is important to clarify that when Strauss expressed his criticism of democracy, he did not target the entire liberal democracy system but only a specific weakness within the system, which is mass democracy. This weakness allowed Hitler to rise to power in a democratic way, and we can see a similar trend in the rise of populism and leaders like Trump, which is further discussed in the third chapter.

It is worth noting that critiques of mass democracy or the tyranny of the majority have been and are still being debated by many other thinkers, including Tocqueville, but they are not considered anti-democratic or enemies of democracy. In fact, criticism and

¹¹⁵ Leo Strauss (1959), What Is Liberal Education? The University of Chicago, P 314.

¹¹⁶ A. J. W. (2022). Leo Strauss - Liberal Education Responsibility. p 344. dokumen.tips. <https://dokumen.tips/documents/leo-strauss-liberal-education-responsibility-59018e4d0229b.html>

debate are essential to the development and survival of democracies. Therefore, branding Strauss as anti-democratic solely because of his critique of mass democracy was exaggerated.

3. Strauss's Philosophy and American Foreign Policy

Since the 2003 Iraq War, the term "Straussians" has become more widely used. Some thinkers and the media connected American foreign policy at that time with the ideas of Strauss. In other words, it has been suggested that what occurred during the Bush administration was a plan outlined by Strauss and put into practice by his followers, the Straussians. This label has been applied to a group of people known as the neoconservative movement, and Strauss has been called the intellectual father of the neoconservatives, even though he passed away 30 years prior. Therefore, this section explores both sides of the argument regarding the Strauss and the Iraq War. ¹¹⁷

3.1 Strauss and neo-conservatism: The Iraq War

Drury updated her book in 2005, which was originally written about Strauss's political ideas in 1988. In the updated introduction, Drury reveals that she did not anticipate witnessing the manifestation of the tyranny of the wise that she had previously discussed in her book about Strauss in 1988. The fact that such a phenomenon would occur in a liberal country such as the United States was especially unexpected. Drury contends that a thorough comprehension of the political climate during the George W. Bush presidency necessitates an understanding of Strauss's ideas and his supporters. ¹¹⁸

Drury provides evidence to support her argument, including specific examples. One such example was Paul Wolfowitz, who served as Deputy Minister of Defense and an assistant to Vice President Dick Cheney during the Bush Administration. Drury alleged that Wolfowitz played a significant role in planning the Iraq War. Additionally, she noted that Wolfowitz studied under Leo Strauss at the University of Chicago, followed by Allan Bloom at Cornell. Bloom's book "Closing of the American Mind" gained

¹¹⁷ Zuckert, M. P. (2009). *The Cambridge Companion to Leo Strauss*. Cambridge University Press. pp. 263-264.

¹¹⁸ Drury, S. (2006). *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss, Updated Edition*. Springer. p. xii.

popularity for using Strauss's ideas to critique American culture. Bloom argued that American liberal society was empty, nihilistic, and lacking meaning. ¹¹⁹

In the second example, The Office of Special Plans had Abram Shulsky as its Director, who was a student of Strauss. His primary responsibility was to procure intelligence that could justify the American government's decision to war with Iraq. However, the intelligence that was gathered turned out to be unreliable and exaggerated. As per Drury, Shulsky acknowledged that Strauss was his political mentor, and he imbibed from him the notion that deceit was occasionally needed in political circumstances. ¹²⁰

It seems that Shulsky's actions are in line with Strauss' approach of keeping significant information hidden from the public for their own benefit. Strauss discussed these tactics of concealment in different manners, such as in his work about Farabi where he referred to a story of pious fraud, and in his work about liberal education where he explained the division between the gentlemen and the vulgar, highlighting the intellectual gap between them that prevents shared aims and behaviors.

In her interpretation of the reason why people may believe in these kinds of elites, she supposes that fear can grip citizens' minds to endorse some policies that cannot be accepted in normal and peaceful cases. In the American example, Drury claims that fear dominated American minds during the period of American political history since the attacks of September 11. ¹²¹

During George W. Bush's administration, members of the Straussian group took advantage of this time of fear in the United States to implement policies that threatened the country's liberal democracy. The government convinced Parliament to relinquish its power to declare war by citing the existence of external enemies referred to as the "axis of evil." Congress also passed the Patriot Act, which granted unprecedented power to the police and executive branches of the government. Consequently, individuals can be detained indefinitely without being charged, receiving legal counsel, or receiving a trial.

¹¹⁹ Drury, S. (2006). *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss, Updated Edition*. Springer. p. x

¹²⁰ Drury, S. (2006). *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss, Updated Edition*. Springer. p. xi

¹²¹ Drury, S. (2006). *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss, Updated Edition*. Springer. pp. xii, xiii.

Here, Straussians within the American government employed the concept of noble lies. They deceived the American population by regarding them as masses who were unaware of the actual threat posed by Saddam Hussein and his al-Qaeda allies, the militant Islamic terrorist organization headed by Osama bin Laden. The government alleged that Saddam was hiding nuclear weapons, which ultimately led to Iraq's invasion in 2003. This has led to lengthy conflicts in a region with a wide range of ethnicities. ¹²²

Drury concluded that there was insufficient evidence of the existence of nuclear weapons in Iraq, nor was there any link between Saddam Hussein's secular dictatorship and militant Islamic groups. The administration of Bush defended its actions, citing erroneous intelligence as the cause, but Drury was of the opinion that the administration deliberately fabricated intelligence. This was done with the goal of overthrowing the Iraqi government and setting up a model of democracy emulated by other Middle Eastern nations. ¹²³

According to Drury, President George W. Bush clarified the extremist nature of neo-conservatives in his interview with Christianity Today. Bush stated that his government aims to bring cultural change not only in America but also throughout the world, including Iraq and the Middle East. This raises the question of how America will undergo this transformation, and this is where political deception comes into play. Irving Kristol, known as "the godfather of neoconservatism," suggested a solution that involves using democracy to suppress liberty. ¹²⁴

Some neo-conservatism argues that the promotion of freedom can have negative consequences, including higher rates of crime, drug abuse, and family breakdown. Additionally, they hold the belief that liberal societies are not strong enough in their stance against communism and terrorism, which could ultimately pose a threat to national security. As a result, many Americans became fearful and elected a government

¹²² Minowitz, P. (2009). *Straussophobia*. Lexington Books. p. 280.

¹²³ S. F. (2018). *Hijacking Catastrophe: 9/11, Fear & the Selling of American Empire*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MtVLxwmKvg>

¹²⁴ Drury, S. (2006). *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss, Updated Edition*. Springer. p xxvii.

that declared a permanent state of emergency, allowing for suspension of the rule of law, as mentioned previously. ¹²⁵

A final observation made by Drury suggests that the use of the noble lie in American foreign policy during the Iraq War shares similarities with tactics employed by Hitler to manipulate citizens. Hitler employed propaganda, lies, myths, and illusions as a means of gaining compliance from the public. Similarly, Strauss proposed the use of noble lies as a means of solving issues with uncooperative masses. ¹²⁶

3.2 Strauss's Impact on American Foreign Policy: A More Balanced View

In response to the previous claims concerning Strauss and the Iraq war, it is necessary to address the accusations of "noble lies" as a key component of this argument. Does Strauss' emphasis on esotericism mean that he approves of leaders deceiving the masses for manipulative purposes? First, it is important to understand that Strauss's ideas about noble lies are presented in the context of a philosopher living under an authoritarian regime. Therefore, he used this technique to convey the truth, which could put him in danger if publicly exposed. Thus, the following question arises: Who would oppose someone expressing his true beliefs in front of an authoritarian regime? Indeed, it would be an act of heroism. ¹²⁷

However, the media and some scholars may use a concept in the wrong way by taking it out of its original context and applying it to a different situation. A good example is the Iraq War, in which politicians were caught lying to their people. However, this was not what Strauss intended for his concept. He believed in expressing honest and true ideas, rather than lies or falsehoods. It is also important to note that Strauss' assumption was made in an authoritarian context, while the Iraq War decision was in a liberal context.

¹²⁵ Drury, S. (2006). *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss*, Updated Edition. Springer. p. xxvii.

¹²⁶ Zuckert, C. H., & Zuckert, M. P. (2008). *The Truth about Leo Strauss*. University of Chicago Press. p. 17.

¹²⁷ Zuckert, C. H., & Zuckert, M. P. (2008). *The Truth about Leo Strauss*. University of Chicago Press. p. 125.

One could say that Strauss allowed for the use of noble lies, even in situations where the truth may not be accepted by the public, regardless of whether it is in an authoritarian context or not. However, I repeat again that it is important to note that Strauss specifically referred to "noble" lies, meaning that falsehoods or fake information like those that occurred during the Iraq war would not be applicable. As I mentioned before, disregarding the "noble" aspect of the term "Noble Lie" would intentionally ignore a crucial part of the concept. ¹²⁸

Moreover, it is important to acknowledge that the act of politicians lying on their constituents is not a new phenomenon that arose after Strauss's books were published. This behavior has been present for centuries, even prior to Strauss's birth. Therefore, it is illogical to associate Strauss with the lies that were told by the Bush administration during the Iraq War, or any future deceptive actions that may be taken by American politicians. ¹²⁹

Hence, it is important to argue that does not mean if I am a follower of a thinker that I present him perfectly or I grasp his ideas deeply. Additionally, it is common for two people to interpret a book differently; Even Strauss himself reads classic great books in a unique manner compared to other philosophers. Therefore, it does not make sense to stigmatize Strauss's legacy by evaluating his adherents' thoughts or behaviors in the political realm. ¹³⁰

To conclude, every human work has flaws as well as advantages, and that is what I perceive in the works of Leo Strauss. Although Leo Strauss's ideas are not conventional, a comprehensive analysis of the criticisms directed at him leads me to the following remarks.

¹²⁸ Zuckert, C. H., & Zuckert, M. P. (2008). *The Truth about Leo Strauss*. University of Chicago Press. p. 127.

¹²⁹ Zuckert, C. H., & Zuckert, M. P. (2008). *The Truth about Leo Strauss*. University of Chicago Press. p.124.

¹³⁰ Zuckert, M. P. (2009). *The Cambridge Companion to Leo Strauss*. Cambridge University Press. pp. 263-264.

Before we delve into the topic, let me clarify that I perceive Strauss as a conservative political philosopher who favors the elite over the masses. He derives this preference from classic literature that highlights the dangers of majority tyranny, as well as the political climate of his time that saw democracy falter after World War II, with the rise of dictators like Hitler. With respect to his stance on democracy, Strauss was undoubtedly influenced by these setbacks, which prompted him to criticize the system in the hopes of improving it since he viewed it as the best possible system.

Regarding the impact of Leo Strauss on American foreign policy in Iraq, I believe that there has been an exaggeration. The analysis on this matter was not based on analysis of his behavior or work on American politics. Instead, it was based on the behavior of his adherents, those who either studied under him or read his writings. It is worth noting that Strauss did not write or address works on the American political reality, despite having the freedom to do so in the democratic climate available in America at that time.

This indicates two things. First, Strauss was unwilling to involve himself deeply in American political reality. Second, it indicates that he did not need to use an esoteric writing style to make his points. Therefore, based on the arguments I have provided, I do not believe that claims connecting Strauss with the 2003 Iraq war are well-proven or fair.

Chapter Three

the Rise of Populism in Light of Strauss's Political Thought

Given the controversies surrounding Strauss and his potential involvement in the Iraq invasion, it is important to examine the relationship between Strauss's ideas, populism, Straussians, and the Trump administration. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a comprehensive and unbiased analysis of these allegations, which are divided into three distinct parts.

The first section focuses on the theoretical aspect of exploring Strauss's interpretation of liberal democratic crises and populism. The second evaluates the Claremont Straussian Justification of Trump. Finally, the third part takes a different approach by examining the link between Strauss's thoughts and Trump from an alternative perspective, as opposed to the viewpoint of Claremont Straussians.

1. Strauss, Populism, and the Crisis of Liberal Democracy

First, it is crucial to delve into the theoretical aspect of the subject, which entails understanding and interpreting the phenomenon of populism through Strauss's work. In his writings, Strauss addresses this issue through the lens of what is known as mass culture or mass democracy. According to Strauss, democracy is the most suitable system, as it provides the flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances and allows intellectuals and philosophers to play an active role in the betterment of society.

However, Strauss discusses his observations on democracy in several works. He shares Rousseau's belief that a functional democratic system requires the presence of high-quality citizens. To be more precise, Rousseau posits that "If there were a people consisting of gods, it would rule itself democratically. A government of such perfection is not suitable for human beings."⁽¹³¹⁾ . Additionally, in his article "What is Liberal Education?" Strauss criticizes modern democracy, pointing out that it is almost a mass

¹³¹. Burns, T. W. (2021, November 1). Leo Strauss on Democracy, Technology, and Liberal Education. State University of New York Press, P 18.

democracy controlled by mass culture that comprises citizens who read nothing except football news and comics pages. ⁽¹³²⁾

Therefore, According to Strauss's perspective, democracy is inherently vulnerable, and lacks the capacity to safeguard itself. Despite the objective of modern liberal democracy to promote freedom, it may at times limit the freedom of citizens. For instance, Hitler's example illustrates how a charismatic leader can exploit democracy and the majority's decisions to curtail individual liberties. ¹³³ This society, dominated by mass culture, is not equipped to maintain stable democracy for an extended period. In such a culture, citizens may not possess the critical thinking skills necessary to make informed decisions, which could lead to dangerous outcomes in democracies. For example, citizens may vote for extremist leaders. This situation is precisely what we observe with the recent rise of populism, long after Strauss's death. ¹³⁴

After deconstructing the populism phenomenon, according to Strauss, a fundamental question arises: how can the emergence of another populist leader in a liberal democracy be prevented? Additionally, Is this problem solely related to mass culture in liberal democratic countries?

These questions must be addressed realistically. Throughout human history, extremist rhetoric and evil tendencies have been common occurrences. This suggests that evilness is inherently present in human nature but is often hidden until exceptional situations provoke people to reveal it. For instance, the ongoing issue of immigration in the Western world, particularly after the Syrian War, has brought to light extreme voices that were previously hidden. Similarly, the extremist wave in Germany during Hitler's regime cannot be viewed in isolation from the persecution of Germans after the First World War and their desire for retaliation. Therefore, it is imperative to acknowledge and address the underlying factors and contexts that give rise to extremist voices in individuals in order to curb support for populism.

¹³² Strauss, L. (2004). What is liberal education? *Academic Questions*, 17(1), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12129-003-1046-2>, p 313.

¹³³ Zuckert, C. H., & Zuckert, M. P. (2008). *The Truth about Leo Strauss*. University of Chicago Press, p 66.

¹³⁴ Zuckert, C. H., & Zuckert, M. P. (2008). *The Truth about Leo Strauss*. University of Chicago Press, p 66.

In his article titled "Liberal Education and Responsibility," Strauss draws attention to the possibility that even those who have received liberal education may still be susceptible to radicalization or exhibit extreme inclinations. As previously mentioned, he asserted that his liberal education project could not guarantee genuine results. Strauss cites examples of well-educated thinkers who have succumbed to extremism, such as Friedrich Nietzsche, who played a significant role in the emergence of fascism.¹³⁵

It is imperative to note that the previous argument does not imply that the Populism phenomenon is solely attributable to the masses, majority qualification, or an exceptional context that provokes extremist voices. It is clear that the rhetoric of populism can also influence the decisions of the majority, but this populist rhetoric has been observed in many situations without resulting in the current unprecedented wave of populism. Furthermore, the argument that context provokes extremism in human nature does not justify supporting populism or extremism, even during times of crises. Instead, intellectuals should engage in critical discussions that confront extremism and condemn any promotion of populism or extremism, regardless of circumstances.

2. The Claremont Straussian Justification for Trump

After concluding the theoretical section, it is imperative to proceed with the practical part of this analysis, which focuses on applying Strauss' legacy to the evaluation of President Trump's tenure. This section begins with an examination of the conservative Straussians at the Claremont Institute, who assert that Strauss's ideas are consistent with or justify Trump's policies and rhetoric. This phase comprises of three stages. First, it considers the compatibility between the criticisms leveled by Claremont Straussian's critics of the current liberal democracy in America and Strauss's thoughts. Second, it evaluates the extent to which Claremont Straussians align with Trump. Finally, I present my responses to their claims.

Commencing with the first stage, the announcement of Trump's nomination sparked a debate among American intellectuals, particularly conservative scholars, with many opposing the mainstream of Trump's speech. However, there were some conservative scholars who supported Trump, such as Michael Anton, who wrote an essay titled 'The

¹³⁵ Strauss, L. (1962), *Liberal education and responsibility*, p 344.

Flight 93 Election' in 2016 that became viral at the time. In the essay, Anton framed Trumpism as the only viable alternative to sclerotic conservatism, and he received support from West Coast Strauss admirers, including Charles Kesler, a student of Harry V. Jaffa, at the Claremont Institute.¹³⁶

As mentioned earlier, it is crucial to acknowledge that Leo Strauss's work is highly contentious, leading to various interpretations among scholars. Consequently, various factions of admirers, commonly referred to as "Straussians," have emerged.¹³⁷ Hence, when I use the term "Straussian," it should not be assumed that indicates an accurate or definitive representation of Strauss's ideas but rather reflects a particular scholar's comprehension of his philosophy. It is important to keep this in mind when studying claims about Strauss's relationship between conservatism and Trump in this chapter.

Regarding Claremont intellectuals, Harry V. Jaffa was a prominent intellectual who made significant contributions to the establishment of the institution. Jaffa received his education from the New School for Social Research, where he was mentored by Leo Strauss. Following the presidency of George W. Bush, Strauss's disciples retreated to the realm of academia, leaving the public sphere. However, the "Claremonters" on the West Coast chose to pursue a different course of action. This institute aims to function as the central nerve center of the American right by engaging various thinkers including Jaffa and Charles Kesler.¹³⁸

Regarding The Flight 93 Election essay, the author of this essay makes a compelling argument that conservatives were faced with a difficult choice in the 2016 presidential election. They had to either vote for Donald Trump, a bold and risky candidate or face a certain defeat. The metaphor of Flight 93, the only plane on 9/11 that was stopped from hitting its target by passengers who took control of the aircraft, was used to convey the urgency of the decision. The essay has sparked much discussion and debate, with some

¹³⁶ Brühwiler, C. F. (2023). "Strauss-a-Lago": Branding Trumpism as a Conservative Alternative. *Comparative Political Theory*, 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1163/26669773-bja10044>. P. 1.

¹³⁷ Steven b. smith (2009), introduction: Leo Strauss Today, the Cambridge companion to Leo Strauss, p 1.

¹³⁸ Brühwiler, C. F. (2023). "Strauss-a-Lago": Branding Trumpism as a Conservative Alternative. *Comparative Political Theory*, 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1163/26669773-bja10044>. pp. 15-16.

viewing it as a crucial warning about the dangers of liberalism, while others see it as a manipulative tactic to gain support for an unqualified and risky candidate. It's worth noting that Anton was eventually hired by the Trump Administration in strategic communications.¹³⁹

Kesler and Anton's argument revolves around identifying an intellectual foundation to support Donald Trump, which is based mainly on their interpretation of Strauss's criticism of liberal democracy and modernity. They assert that these criticisms are consistent with their own assessments of current American politics, which they contend to be dominated by the Democratic Party and its intellectual adherents. According to their perspective, Strauss's ideas serve as a theoretical framework for comprehending and contesting the prevailing political ideology.¹⁴⁰

To further elaborate on the topic, they shed more light on Strauss's arguments, which are in line with Nietzsche's critique of the consequences of modernity. According to Nietzsche and Strauss, modernity gave rise to what he called "the Last Man" - a human being who prioritizes fulfilling immediate and basic needs such as acquiring the latest gadgets, owning a modern house, finding a secure job, and ensuring their children attend good schools. This pragmatic outlook creates a weakened form of humanity that is devoid of moral principles and lacks political consciousness, thus impeding society's progress toward loftier objectives.¹⁴¹

In the meantime, They mentioned Strauss's argument, which indicate that the West has succumbed to nihilism, a philosophy that holds that all values and ends are worth equally or meaningless. Strauss argued that modernity is in crisis because people in the West have lost their ability to differentiate between what is good and bad, right and wrong. Science has made great progress in human life, making people believe in it.

¹³⁹. Brühwiler, C. F. (2023). "Strauss-a-Lago": Branding Trumpism as a Conservative Alternative. *Comparative Political Theory*, 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1163/26669773-bja10044>. P. 8.

¹⁴⁰. Brühwiler, C. F. (2023). "Strauss-a-Lago": Branding Trumpism as a Conservative Alternative. *Comparative Political Theory*, 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1163/26669773-bja10044>. pp. 15-16.

¹⁴¹ Zuckert, C. H., & Zuckert, M. P. (2008). *The Truth about Leo Strauss*. University of Chicago Press. P. 66.

However, the downside of this belief is that value judgments are considered illusions or unscientific. In other words, scientific knowledge is limited to factual judgment.

The problem of having equal worth for values is dangerous because healthy societies believe that their values and ideals are superior to those of other societies; thus, these superior values are worthy of sacrifice. Strauss supposes that the West's citizens believe that their values are not superior; thus they do not sacrifice, die, and fight for their society's values, which lead to the decline and deterioration of their civilization.¹⁴²

Moving to how the conservative intellectuals use Strauss's legacy, Allan Bloom, a conservative intellectual and a student of Strauss, held a strong conviction that Nihilism was not the primary cause of the crisis in modern society. Instead, he believed that it was merely a symptom and consequence of a more profound malaise that originated in early modernity. Instead, Bloom referred to Strauss's argument regarding the role of positivism as one of the root causes of the modernity crisis. Positivism, which emphasizes the importance of practical scientific methods in acquiring knowledge, contends that political science should be value-free or ethically neutral, thereby denying the possibility of objective value judgment. Bloom argued that this approach, which denies the existence of objective moral values, has significantly contributed to the crisis in modern society.¹⁴³

Irving Kristol, widely known as the father of neo-conservatism, adopted Strauss's theory regarding the "crisis of the West." Kristol and other conservative intellectuals applied this idea to the current state of America, arguing that liberal capitalism, which emerged from modernity, is responsible for eroding the sense of community. They also asserted that this system causes individuals to prioritize self-interest over the public interest. As a result, the focus has shifted from self-sacrifice to self-interest and rights have taken precedence over duty. These arguments align with Strauss and Nietzsche's argument that modernity led to the creation of a weakened form of humanity.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² Drury, S. (2006). *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss*, Updated Edition. Springer, P 161.

¹⁴³ Strauss, L. (1953). *Natural Right and History*. University of Chicago Press, pp. 16-17.

¹⁴⁴ Thompson, C. B. (2015), *Neoconservatism*, Routledge. pp. 104-105.

Kristol argued that the foundation of a capitalist society is rooted in selfish acquisition and pursuit of pleasure. However, he also believed that the affluence that capitalism brings undermines the bourgeois moral virtues and habits that are essential to sustaining capitalism in the long run. These virtues include thrift, honesty, sobriety, and probity.¹⁴⁵

Moreover, Kristol's raises a fundamental question regarding the desirability of a society that places selfishness and self-interest above all else. He highlighted the crucial role of public virtue as a key indicator of a thriving society, as opposed to simply pursuing wealth creation and individualism. In essence, his view calls for a reassessment of societal values with an emphasis on fostering public virtue instead of fixating solely on individual freedoms.¹⁴⁶

As previously mentioned, Kristol's argument is extracted from Strauss's perspective on the issues of freedom and virtues. Strauss highlighted the difference between modern and classical views on the aims of human life and society. According to him, classical philosophers have a distinct goal compared to modern philosophers. They believed that the purpose of human and social life is not just to attain freedom, but also to cultivate virtues. Classical thinkers were cautious about freedom and regarded it as an ambiguous value because it encompassed both freedom from evil and freedom for good.¹⁴⁷

Conservative Straussians such as Kristol proposed a solution to address the significant weaknesses of capitalist American society. They identified a fundamental challenge with liberal utilitarianism, which lacks a strong framework for civic loyalty. In order to counter this, they suggest promoting nationalism as a solution. According to their views, nationalism fosters selfless devotion to greater causes, thereby acting as a driving force for Americans to pursue virtuous lives and attain their highest levels of moral excellence.¹⁴⁸

To achieve this, they argue that the state must play a critical role in promoting nationalism within society. Additionally, the state must take on the responsibility of determining what is factual and erroneous, virtuous and immoral, fair and unfair.

¹⁴⁵ Thompson, C. B. (2015), *Neoconservatism*, Routledge. p. 108.

¹⁴⁶ Thompson, C. B. (2015), *Neoconservatism*, Routledge. p. 110.

¹⁴⁷ Leo Strauss (1957), *What is Political philosophy*, the university of Chicago press, p 36.

¹⁴⁸ Thompson, C. B. (2015), *Neoconservatism*, Routledge. pp. 267-268.

In the meantime, Anton, for instance, blames both conservatism and liberalism in the current state of affairs in the United States. He believes that many leaders in the conservative movement have failed to acknowledge the pressing need for change and have been influenced by the prevailing liberal trends, whether right or wrong. According to Anton, American society has lost its sense of unity and has become vulnerable to globalist elites, who prioritize principles that ultimately harm the nation. This includes the acceptance of immigrants from third-world countries who have no prior exposure to or appreciation for liberty.¹⁴⁹

In his analysis, Anton submits that conservative politicians have adopted liberal and leftist ideologies. He posits that the fear of being labeled as "racist" serves as the driving force behind their submission to the policies of the political left. Furthermore, he argues that conservative intellectuals are frequently accused of espousing Nazi ideologies and, as a result, choose to surrender to avoid such accusations. The right is often condemned as extremist, racist, and Nazi, even before supporting Trump, prompting Anton to question what they stand to lose by fighting back and openly supporting Trump.¹⁵⁰

In addition, Anton argues that many Republican politicians claim to support diversity and immigrants in society to avoid being labeled as racists, even though they do not truly believe in the importance of diversity. Their goal was to secure votes during elections. However, they could not apply their true beliefs to the American political system. In other words, conservative actors are expected to participate and lose, but they remain a necessary part of the political game. According to Anton, Donald Trump was the only person who had broken this cycle of surrendering conservatism.¹⁵¹

According to Anton, in addition to the utilization of labels and condemnations, such as supporting Nazism, there exist institutional obstacles that hinder the efforts of conservative and right-wing actors. These obstacles are due to the fact that American institutions have been inherently designed by leftists. Anton recommended that it would

¹⁴⁹ Brühwiler, C. F. (2023). "Strauss-a-Lago": Branding Trumpism as a Conservative Alternative. *Comparative Political Theory*, 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1163/26669773-bja10044>. pp. 9-10.

¹⁵⁰ Anton, M. (2019). *After the Flight 93 Election*. Encounter Books. pp. 52-53.

¹⁵¹ Anton, M. (2019). *After the Flight 93 Election*. Encounter Books. p. 63.

be prudent to attempt to rectify this situation, but given Left's firm grasp on every school and cultural center, this endeavor may prove to be futile, much like attempting to introduce democracy in Russia.¹⁵²

In the meantime, Anton expressed dissatisfaction with the role of American universities in forming individual traits. He pointed out that these institutions frequently exhibited the same corruption in American media. This viewpoint was derived from Strauss' work on liberal education. Strauss advocated for the enhancement of the educational process as a means to confront mass culture. He believed that liberal education was a way to establish aristocracy within a democratic mass society.

Drawing from the preceding argument, many conservative thinkers advocate for the state to possess the authority to oversee all aspects of education, ranging from early childhood to higher education. The rationale behind this proposition is to ensure that education aligns with the interests of the state as a whole, impart essential knowledge about democratic principles and personal and civic morals, and foster patriotic attitudes.¹⁵³

Moving to the second stage, Let us take a closer look at the connection between the conservative Straussians in the Claremont School and Trump. The preceding discussions aimed to establish a theoretical foundation for their arguments, drawing from Strauss's legacy, to support their criticism of American politics. As a result, these critics believe that a strong and courageous leader who believes in conservative ideas is required to bring about change. Conservative intellectuals argue that Trump is the right leader at this moment because his political approach deviates from the current conservative ideology that many have embraced in recent years.¹⁵⁴

The 2016 election is viewed as an opportunity by some, such as Kesler, who believes that Trump's populist rhetoric can help re-establish the conservative movement and bring the Republican Party back to its roots. Essentially, Trump paves the way for a new

¹⁵² Anton, M. (2019). *After the Flight 93 Election*. Encounter Books. p. 56.

¹⁵³ Thompson, C. B. (2015), *Neoconservatism*, Routledge. p. 113.

¹⁵⁴ Brühwiler, C. F. (2023). "Strauss-a-Lago": Branding Trumpism as a Conservative Alternative. *Comparative Political Theory*, 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1163/26669773-bja10044>. pp. 9-10.

type of conservatism that aligns with the values and beliefs of those who follow Claremont's school of thought.¹⁵⁵

To provide concrete examples and further clarify the relationship between these conservative thoughts and Trump, several conservative intellectuals have expressed their support for Donald Trump because of his unconventional approach to implementing a ban on Muslim citizens from entering the United States. Moreover, they also admired his proposal to construct a physical barrier along the Mexican border as a means of curtailing illegal immigration. Trump is widely considered an exceptional candidate who has made strategic decisions at precisely the right junctures in response to the surge of immigrants, which has had a significant impact on both the economic and cultural aspects of Europe and the United States. Hence, Trump's policies align with their stance against immigration and promote a less diverse society.¹⁵⁶

In addition, several conservative intellectuals have asserted that Trump's objective is to create a revolutionary government that would dismantle the deep state. Furthermore, even if Trump does not remain politically active, the principles and policies of Trumpism could potentially bring about significant transformations in the present state of affairs. Accordingly, Trump's stance is in line with conservative assertions that denounce the institutional paradigm in America as under the sway of leftist ideologies.¹⁵⁷

Finally, it is important to emphasize that Michael Anton, the writer of the essay "The Flight 93 Election," was later chosen by the Trump Administration to serve the critical role of strategic communications. This fact is worth reiterating, as it underscores the

¹⁵⁵ Brühwiler, C. F. (2023). "Strauss-a-Lago": Branding Trumpism as a Conservative Alternative. *Comparative Political Theory*, 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1163/26669773-bja10044>. pp. 9-10.

¹⁵⁶ Brühwiler, C. F. (2023). "Strauss-a-Lago": Branding Trumpism as a Conservative Alternative. *Comparative Political Theory*, 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1163/26669773-bja10044>. pp. 9-10.

¹⁵⁷ Brühwiler, C. F. (2023). "Strauss-a-Lago": Branding Trumpism as a Conservative Alternative. *Comparative Political Theory*, 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1163/26669773-bja10044>. pp. 15-16.

significance and effect of Anton's political perspectives as well as conservative thinkers' influence on the Trump administration.¹⁵⁸

The third and last stage of this discussion pertains to the response to Claremont Straussian claims. It is important to provide an impartial assessment of the argument presented by some Claremont Straussians and their claims regarding Trump. It should be noted that the interpretation of Strauss's works can be influenced by the reader's personal background. This means that Strauss can be understood in different ways depending on the reader's perspective, level of understanding, and impartiality. Some may view Strauss as critically supportive of liberal democracy, whereas others may perceive him as an openly anti-democratic and authoritarian figure. Hence, the reader's perspective, level of comprehension, and impartiality play critical roles in interpreting Strauss's work.¹⁵⁹

It is worth delving into their belief that state regulation of all aspects of human life can lead to a transformation in the character of citizens. While they argue that such state involvement can enhance the character of individuals,¹⁶⁰ it is important to further examine this claim and explore specific examples. For instance, China is a country where the state controls all human matters, but does this necessarily make citizens there better than citizens in open societies, such as those in Europe or America?

Additionally, in today's open and democratic societies, it has become increasingly difficult for individuals and organizations to exert control or surveillance over the public arena. The internet has made self-education and self-informing resources more easily accessible, providing people with a vast range of information sources. As a result, traditional notions of control and oversight are no longer applicable to a democratic state. The act of manipulating or influencing the minds of citizens is akin to the totalitarian regimes of the 1960s era.

¹⁵⁸ Brühwiler, C. F. (2023). "Strauss-a-Lago": Branding Trumpism as a Conservative Alternative. *Comparative Political Theory*, 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1163/26669773-bja10044>. P. 8.

¹⁵⁹ Brühwiler, C. F. (2023). "Strauss-a-Lago": Branding Trumpism as a Conservative Alternative. *Comparative Political Theory*, 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1163/26669773-bja10044>. pp. 11-13.

¹⁶⁰ Thompson, C. B. (2015), *Neoconservatism*, Routledge. p. 275.

Moreover, there are some confusing claims in the arguments made by Claremont Straussians. It is important to note that there are differences between the ideologies of left-wing parties and liberal democracy, which form the foundation of the American political system. The contention for a robust state presence in the supervision and guidance of all citizen issues and creating a particular kind of citizen is not merely an objection to left-wing policies, as they would like to believe. Instead, it is a direct challenge to the fundamental principles of individual freedom.

The role of the state is not to shape its citizens into a rigid mold that serves its own purposes, but rather to oversee the management of public affairs, protect the fundamental rights of individuals, and enhance the quality of life for its citizens. Thus, Claremont Straussians' claims can potentially result in the creation of an authoritarian political system in the United States.

In terms of the relationship between the conservative Straussians and Trump, I believe that Trump does not accurately represent the conservative mainstream. More precisely, conservative Straussians view capitalism as one of the main issue in American society due to its promotion of individualism and other negative outcomes.¹⁶¹ However, Trump, being a businessman, embodies the outcomes of capitalism that Claremont Straussians opposed. Therefore, while Trump's policies may align with some conservative Straussians at the Claremont institution, he cannot be considered an unadulterated embodiment of conservative ideology.

Another crucial point, upon careful examination of Strauss's works, it becomes clear that he can be classified as a conservative thinker. However, it is essential to distinguish between conservative and extreme thoughts. While both Claremont Straussian and Strauss share a conservative view of politics, Strauss chose to confront the shortcomings of liberal democracy and modernity through intellectual and wise means. Conversely, Claremont Straussians, while also holding conservative beliefs, supported former President Trump's employment of extreme tactics to reshape the political landscape in the United States.¹⁶²

¹⁶¹ Thompson, C. B. (2015), *Neoconservatism*, Routledge. pp. 104-108.

¹⁶² Burns, T. W. (2021, November 1). *Leo Strauss on Democracy, Technology, and Liberal Education*, State University of New York Press, P 37.

To provide a clearer explanation, both criticized reality; however, Strauss's remedy to liberal democracy was through his project for liberal education. Strauss advocated for the reading of great books and the cultivation of a select group of individuals, known as "gentlemen", who possess extensive knowledge and skills to effectively govern the state, either directly or indirectly. ¹⁶³

Finally, it is crucial to highlight that not all conservative thinkers endorse Trump's nomination. The support of some conservatives for Trump does not necessarily imply that all conservative or Straussian mainstream individuals share the same perspective. As previously stated, some conservatives opposed Trump. For instance, Professor Emeritus Micha Brumlik expressed in the German weekly *Die Zeit* in 2018 that "It is hard to imagine that Leo Strauss would have viewed Trump as anything but a vulgar brawler - someone who is striving to become a tyrant and thus should be removed as quickly as possible." ¹⁶⁴

3. Strauss and Trump: A Different Perspective

Claremont Straussians' assumptions are flawed as they predetermine their aim, citing Strauss' arguments to serve their objective of supporting Trump. Consequently, this section offers an alternative interpretation of the Claremont Straussians' interpretation by drawing upon Strauss's genuine life experiences and views against extremism and populist leaders who exploit the masses and the "last man" during their time.

Leo Strauss was confronted with an earlier version of populism during his lifetime, which arose from the failure of democracy in Weimar and the subsequent rise of Hitler ¹⁶⁵ As a result; Strauss held a strong stance against old extremist or populist leaders, which gave us a glimpse into his position towards contemporary extremist or populist leaders, such as Trump. While some may argue that there are differences between Hitler and Trump, I acknowledge that. However, there are sufficient shared policies to suggest

¹⁶³ Burns, T. W. (2021, November 1). *Leo Strauss on Democracy, Technology, and Liberal Education*, State University of New York Press, P 37.

¹⁶⁴ Brühwiler, C. F. (2023). "Strauss-a-Lago": Branding Trumpism as a Conservative Alternative. *Comparative Political Theory*, 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1163/26669773-bja10044>. P. 8.

¹⁶⁵ Zuckert, C. H., & Zuckert, M. P. (2008). *The Truth about Leo Strauss*. University of Chicago Press.p.p 189-190.

significant similarities between the two cases. This allows us to imagine how Strauss viewed Trumpanism.

By examining these similarities from various perspectives, we can gain a better understanding of Strauss's views on trumpanism. First, let us consider the treatment of ethnic and religious minorities. For example, Trump's harsh rhetoric and policies towards Muslims, as well as his travel ban on individuals from certain countries,¹⁶⁶ bear a striking resemblance to Hitler's persecution of Jewish people.

Moreover, it is worth noting that the slogan of the Trump campaign, "Make America Great Again," bears striking similarities to Adolf Hitler's rhetoric and beliefs. Specifically, both Trump and Hitler asserted the superiority of their respective races and sought to restore their nation's greatness after periods of perceived decline. This parallel is particularly striking, given Hitler's efforts to revive Germany after its defeat in World War I.¹⁶⁷

Finally, two leaders, Trump and Hitler, were capable of manipulating the electorate because of the exceptional circumstances they encountered. Trump's nomination occurred during a period of heightened immigration to the Western world consequent to the Syrian war, the surge of populism in Europe, and the challenging situation in America resulting from President Obama's tentative foreign policies toward Russia's actions in Crimea and the Syrian crisis. Therefore, he appealed to the fears and concerns of the American electorate. Similarly, Hitler's ascension to power was facilitated by the challenging conditions in Germany following their defeat in World War I.

As I mentioned previously, it is imperative to acknowledge that, while the comparison of Trump to Hitler should not be taken too far, the contexts in which they operated are vastly different, particularly with regard to democratic stability and other factors. However, in order to glean relevant insights from Strauss's legacy to evaluate the Trumpanism phenomenon, it is crucial to examine Strauss's real experience with Weimar and Hitler, as it shares some similarities with the trump phenomenon.

¹⁶⁶ C. N. (2016,). The Rise and Rage of Donald Trump : The Fire Breather - the fifth estate documentary. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X3B4lgV1IxQ>

¹⁶⁷ C. N. (2016,). The Rise and Rage of Donald Trump : The Fire Breather - the fifth estate documentary. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X3B4lgV1IxQ>

As I have reflected on recent discussions and debates, I am compelled to voice my dissent against those who try to invoke Strauss's intellectual legacy to justify Trump's rhetoric and policies. In my view, Strauss' concepts and ideals still hold significant relevance in contemporary times, and if he were alive today, he would vehemently condemn the policies of the Trump administration, as he had similar forms of leadership in the past.

In conclusion, in light of the rise of populism in the Western world, the criticism of liberal democracy and mass culture by Strauss is more relevant than ever. To mitigate the negative effects of populism, it is crucial to address the context that fuels extremist behavior to support populist rhetoric. In addition, it is important to address the challenges posed by mass culture.

In the meantime, it is undeniable that Strauss has conservative leaning. However, a small group of Claremont Straussians tried to twist his writings to support the extremist views that Trump espoused. Despite being conservative, Strauss was not extremist. In fact, he stood up against the exploitation of the masses or the "last man" by extremist leaders such as Hitler during his time. Therefore, if Strauss were alive today, he would likely have opposed Trump's policies in the same manner.

Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, we have obtained a multitude of valuable insights that we can distill into the following key points: Strauss, along with many contemporary thinkers, offers a primary critique of majority rule or mass democracy. This is due to the fact that the majority may not possess the necessary qualifications or information regarding intricate political and economic matters, which may result in perilous consequences such as the election of Hitler in the past and the ascent of extremist or populist figures in modern times. ¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁸ Burns, T. W. (2021). *Leo Strauss on Democracy, Technology, and Liberal Education*. State University of New York Press, P 1.

Meanwhile, narrowing the right to vote for qualified individuals poses challenges in defining who qualifies, making it a potentially problematic solution. Furthermore, it infringes on the right to freedom of choice that everyone deserves. This leads to another conclusion that perfection is unattainable and that every human idea, system, and project has flaws. As humans, we must balance the merits and deficits of every idea to minimize possible losses in our choices. It is particularly important to understand that people who implement, practice, and interpret any human work are themselves imperfect. Human beings possess a mix of positive and negative traits such as selfishness, selflessness, evil and goodness, honesty, and dishonesty.

Regarding the phenomena of populism, Populism is not solely attributed to the masses or majority qualification. The context is a critical factor that must be considered. Throughout history, we have seen instances where extremist rhetoric and harmful inclinations have emerged. This indicates that there is an innate capacity for evil within humans that may remain concealed until certain circumstances bring it to light.

For instance, the extreme wave in Germany during Hitler's regime cannot be viewed in isolation from the persecution of Germans after the First World War and their desire to retaliate. Similarly, the ongoing issue of immigration in the Western world, particularly after the Syrian War, has brought to light extreme voices that were previously hidden. Therefore, it is imperative to acknowledge and address the underlying factors and contexts that give rise to extremist voices in individuals in order to curb support for populism.

However, it is important to note that this analysis does not deny the significance of the rhetorical skills that extremist or populist leaders possess. Rather, it clarifies an important point that has not been highlighted in many arguments regarding this phenomenon. Furthermore, this analysis of context does not justify supporting populism or extremism even in exceptional contexts. Instead, intellectuals should engage in critical discussions that confront extremism and condemn any promotion of populism or extremism regardless of circumstances.

Regarding Strauss's legacy and Straussians, the use of the label "Straussians" to categorize them as a unified group is not correct. It is clear, they do not necessarily share the same mindset or form a cohesive group. Even if the label is accurate, it is worth considering the various opinions that they hold about Strauss's teachings, as mentioned in chapter two. In other words, it is worth noting that the interpretation of a thinker's thoughts can be influenced by temporal differences between the reader and the writer, which can result in confusion and various interpretations, even for the same reader across different ages, as happened with Strauss Reading to Machiavelli. Additionally, readers may have their own contexts in mind, which can lead them to impose their beliefs on the text. Therefore, it is crucial to approach texts with an open mind and without preconceived notions to ensure fair and accurate interpretation.

Finally, it is undeniable that Strauss had conservative leaning. However, it is important to note that he was not an extremist. In fact, he stood up against the exploitation of the masses or the "last man" by extremist leaders such as Hitler during his time. Therefore, if Strauss were alive today, he would have likely opposed Trump's policies in the same manner.

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