Review - Leo Strauss: Man of Peace

https://www.e-ir.info/2014/12/07/review-leo-strauss-man-of-peace/

MICHAEL DI GREGORIO, DEC 7 2014

Leo Strauss: Man of Peace
by Robert Howse,
NYU School of Law: New York

To begin, I must emphasize the extent to which Robert Howse's *Leo Strauss: Man of Peace* is a book about Leo Strauss that is *not* exclusively for those steeped in the ever expanding Strauss literature, unlike so much that has a steep learning curve (cf. Velkley 2011; Lampert 2013). Nor is it solely for IR scholars, or even trained political theorists, as Howse's book is easily accessible to a generally learned audience, staying true to Strauss's thought without losing newcomers in his unique rhetoric. This said, Howse's clarity in no way mars his lucidity. Readers already familiar with Strauss, or with some knowledge of Machiavelli, Thucydides, Grotius, or Kant will benefit from Howse's presentation of Strauss as a worthy thinker for international relations. People new to these conversations in IR and Political Theory have an unmatched gateway.

The book follows the last forty years of Strauss's life (early 1930s to early 1970s), with each chapter essentially devoted to the main work of each decade. Howse's book is also the first book to incorporate Strauss's publicly available lectures into its argument and to pay special attention to seminar transcripts. This incorporation comes with risks. As Steven Lenzner and Christopher Nadon both warn, the lecture material is not Strauss's last or most considered word on any topic; at best the lectures are supplements to Strauss's published work. Given this warning, Howse's use of the lecture material is a fine example to follow for future Strauss scholarship. He could have made his argument without the benefit of Strauss's seminars on Kant and Grotius, but their inclusion underlines Howse's assertion about the extent to which "War and Peace" was a central theme to Strauss's thought at key points—indeed, at almost every point—in his career.

The most surprising part of Howse's presentation is also one of its fundamental features: Howse presents Strauss as a realist. But Strauss's realism reflects the very idiosyncratic way that Strauss understands that term, hence why Howse can say Strauss is a man of peace. To say that realism and peace go hand-in-hand is not an easy point to argue, given the strength of the opinion that realism amounts to war-making, and that humanity and compassion in international affairs are too naïve to be reconciled with this worldview. We IR scholars usually understand by "realism" naked Machiavellianism, but Strauss rejects this interpretation both in glosses and also in long, careful interpretations such as Strauss offers of Thucydides (Howse 2014: 32; Strauss 1953: 64-5). Still, Howse is basically outlining a position in IR and international law that treats states as preeminent and essentially self-interested. The key is that this self-interest is of-a-piece with the Thucydidean variety of "self-interest". So realism is not characterized solely by power politics or national interest but comes to sight in Strauss's thought as the need to constantly push *against* the dangerous political consequences of these things because of their ubiquity. Thucydidean, and Straussian, "realism" comes to sight as a critique of *Realpolitik*. If this position is shocking then it is evidence that we all must spend more time reading Thucydides, and we should thank Howse for giving this correction such a prominent airing.

This said, it is a little surprising the see that Hobbes is not given more treatment in Howse's book. If anything is smoking gun proof of the importance of political violence and international law to Strauss's political philosophy it is

his decades long interest in Hobbes. Consider this passage from Strauss's (1952: 158) *Political Philosophy of Hobbes*:

The two fundamental innovations which are to be attributed to Hobbes, the subordination of law to right and the recognition of the full significance of the idea of sovereignty, are closely connected. One sees their common origin when one retraces the condition which made possible the problem of sovereignty.

This "condition" that made possible the problem of sovereignty is the inability of revealed religion to be persuasive about the legitimate title to rule. To put it another way, the "problem of sovereignty" results from the delinking of Biblical prophecy and political security. One must turn to Machiavelli to pursue this problem, but the difficulty is that Strauss's *Thoughts on Machiavelli* is a bewildering book; Hobbes is doubtless a leading and clearer voice. Howse's treatment of Machiavelli reveals that Strauss far from supporting "naked Machiavellianism" differs in his judgment of the relationship between necessity and morality. Machiavelli grants too much room for praising both gain and glory as compelling (and thus, forgivable) forces; Strauss sees actions compelled by gain and glory far less excusable than those compelled by self-preservation (Howse, 2014: 119). Howse traces this difference back to Strauss's appraisal of Thucydides, but also his observation that Machiavelli turns to the student of Socrates, Xenophon, but speaks only about Xenophon's non-Socratic writings. Howse suggests that Machiavelli forgets Xenophon's presentation of Socrates, and consequently loses a sense of the "sacredness of the common" for the sake of the security of the political community (Howse 2014: 116). But writing a book on the importance of Xenophon to international relations, international law, and modern sovereignty is for the moment a bridge too far.

At most these are quibbles with the presentation. There can be no debate with the merits of Howse's treatment of the Kojève-Strauss debate. This is necessary reading for anyone who dares utter the phrase "end of history." The status of Strauss's opinion of world government and his critique of the "universal and homogeneous state" is at issue throughout the chapter. Interestingly, Howse detects a kind of (neo)Kantianism in Strauss's thought. Howse makes a sound case for Strauss's support for Kant's federation of federations at the international level, but one wonders whether Strauss would unproblematically accept the terms of Kant's perpetual peace at the domestic level, bought with the expansion of law. At any rate, the decisive insight is that Strauss is in principle supportive of structures of international governance so long as they respect human diversity and individuality (Howse 2014: 169). The problem with the "universal and homogeneous state" is its homogeneity rather than its universality. A universal state that reflected a politics of "practical particularism" would likely be acceptable.

Here Strauss's cosmopolitanism should be more developed. There is a passing reference to Kurt Riezler (Howse 2014: 71), but if any piece of Strauss's writing speaks directly to his thoughts on "politically relevant cosmopolitanism" and international relations as a discrete political enterprise, Strauss's eulogy to Riezler would be it. Reizler is, of course, an interesting figure in Weimar Germany, and one can learn a great deal by reading Howse's analysis of the intellectual environment of Weimar along side Richard Ned Lebow's*Cultural Theory of International Relations*. Lebow's account—he was himself a student of Morgenthau—side-by-side with Howse's, provides an understanding of the influence of Greek tragedy on the intellectual culture of Weimar Germany and the interwar period, and the importance of *thumos* or spirit on the political climate. To put it simply, Lebow's *thumos* analysis together with Howse's analysis of "warrior morality" provide an account of human passion in international politics, at a pivotal moment in the last century, that is unmatched in IR literature.

In this respect, the relationship between Strauss, Schmitt, and Morgenthau is quite interesting for sociological reasons. Strauss's criticism of Schmitt is always in the background, and indeed is a key part of Howse's *t'shuvah*/redemption thesis (i.e. redemption for youthful sympathy with immoderate philosophy) that is the running theme throughout the book. As the story goes (Scheuerman 2009: 33), Schmitt initially poses "the political" as a discrete domain of life in the 1929 edition of *Concept of the Political*, on which Morgenthau writes a dissertation arguing that the political is a matter of intensity, and any relationship can become political if it achieves the intensity of the friend-enemy polarity. Schmitt incorporates this argument into the 1932 edition of his work, as Morgenthau puts it, "without lifting the veil of anonymity from their author." The implications of the "intensity" argument are *precisely* what Strauss takes up in his review of Schmitt, and that Howse argues is the negative standard against which Strauss orients his international political thought. Interestingly, Morgenthau thanks Strauss for commenting on the new

introduction to his *Politics Among Nations* that contains his famous Six Principles of Realism. Whatever dialogue exists between Strauss and Schmitt on the "moral-political horizon" of the international is made far more interesting with the inclusion of Morgenthau.

I want to push back only a little on the idea of Strauss as "peaceful" thinker, and the activity of philosophy as "peaceful". Certainly Howse is right to say that philosophic dialectics are not warlike, but there is something about Peace that is distinctly *modern*. Hobbes said there was no such greatest good as "the repose of a mind satisfied" because philosophic activity is moved by *eros*, the feeling of longing, and this is hardly peaceful. *Eros* and longing reveal themselves politically as empire and imperialism. This is, of course, Strauss's interpretation of Thucydides' critique of Pericles. Pericles's Funeral Oration is the original image of this relationship, and also the only place in Thucydides' *History* where the word "philosophy" appears. Philosophy is peaceful insofar as it is attached to and requires respect for *nomos* (laws, customs, conventions) as much as it wants to move beyond mere convention. Indeed, one can easily leave Howse's book with the correct impression that Strauss rehabilitates an understanding of law as *nomos* in order to strengthen one half of the nomos-nature dialectic that is indicative of philosophic education. If *eros* can tend towards philosophy or empire we must also remember that there is an alternative understanding of *peace* that Strauss analyzes in his Thucydides Seminar of 1971: *stasis*. Thucydides (as is his way) attributes a new meaning to stasis, treating uprisings and civil disorder under its umbrella. Disorder is "rest" because life is not improving, not progressing. In the Thucydidean context the account of stasis is the most violent and memorable episode of the work (3.82-4). During the *stasis* political society suffered a breakdown of the city's laws, a breakdown of the divine law (impiety was the norm), and the destruction of kin and familial relationships for the sake of partisanship. Perhaps it is for the best that Machiavelli "forgets" Socrates in his founding of Modernity.

All this said, what is undeniable is that Howse has produced the clearest articulation of the fundamental role that "the international" occupies in Strauss's thought. The reason that this has remained obscured is because of Strauss's unorthodox understanding of "nations": the particular and temporal political nation, and the cosmopolitan, universal, transhistorical nation of philosophers. Peaceful relations between the bordered political community and the "borderless community of thinking and knowing" are what Strauss has in mind (Howse 2014: 79). Howse has done all of us a great service by writing this book.

References

Howse, Robert. *Leo Strauss: Mann of Peace*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

Lampert, Laurence. *The Enduring Importance of Leo Strauss*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013.

Lebow, Richard Ned. *A Cultural Theory of International Relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Scheuerman, William, E. *Morgenthau: Realism and Beyond*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009.

Schmitt, Carl. *The Concept of the Political*. Trans. George Schwab. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

Strauss, Leo. *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: Its Basis and its Genesis* . Trans. Elsa M. Sinclair. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952.

Strauss, Leo. *Natural Right and History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953.

Strauss, Leo. *Thoughts on Machiavelli*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958.

Strauss, Leo. *The City and Man*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964.

Strauss, Leo. *On Tyranny: Revised and Expanded Edition*. Victor Gourevitch & Michael S. Roth, Eds. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.

Velkley, Richard. *Heidegger, Strauss, and the Premises of Philosophy: On Original Forgetting* . Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.

About the author:

Michael N. Di Gregorio is a PhD Candidate and Sessional Instructor in Political Science at McMaster University, and commissioning editor for E-International Relations. His research is at the intersection of International Relations Theory and Political Philosophy, and his current research project looks at the relationship between the philosophy of the emotions and the concept of sovereignty. You can contact him by email (digregmn@mcmaster.ca) or on Twitter @mike_digs