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April 28, 2005

The Grand Delusion

> There will be played in Germany a drama compared to which the French revolution will seem but an innocent idyll. At present everything is quiet; though here and there a few men create a stir, do not imagine them to be the real actors in the piece. They are only the little curs who chase each other round the arena, until the appointed hour when the gladiators appear to fight for life and death. And the hour will come.
>
> **Heinrich Heine**
> 1834

I decided to step away from my computer for a few days and catch up on my reading – I'm getting tired of looking at the same set of book covers on the left side of my page, and figured I should either read a couple of them or stop pretending and take them down.

So I spent the better part of last weekend working my way through Shadia Drury's book: *Leo Strauss and the American Right* -- a project I should have tackled several years ago, *before* the neocons re-emerged as such a public menace.

Know thy enemy is always good advice, and while I had some minor dealings with a few of the neocon leading lights during my days as a reporter, I've never really taken the time to study their philosophy, or to learn more about Strauss, their intellectual capo di tutti capo.

Drury, on the other hand, appears to have made an academic career out of it. What's more, she has the distinct advantage of being able to argue Plato and Aristotle with the best of them, while most of what *I* know about the classics comes from watching old Ray Harryhausen movies. Seriously, though, moral philosophy wasn't one of my academic strong suits, and while I'm a little better versed in the *political* dead white guys that mattered to Strauss (such as Hobbes, Rousseau and Machiavelli) I'd never try to play the expert -- not in front of a live audience anyway.

But I am, for obvious reasons, intensely interested in the political ideas that have influenced the neocon cadres -- which is to say, I'd really like to know how the bastards think.

Drury is a liberal, and, being a Canadian, doesn't have to pretend to be something else, as American liberals have felt compelled to do since about 1968. So she's hardly an objective source. However, since I'm a "progressive" (i.e. a post-1968 American liberal) it seems reasonable to assume my interpretation of Strauss, and of the neocons, would be roughly comparable with hers if I had spent the better part of *my* adult years studying their moral philosophy.

And if that seems like a blatant example of wanting to have my existing prejudices reinforced, sue me. This is a blog post, not a dissertation.

Watch on the Rhine

What strikes me most about the Straussians – and by extension, the neocons – is that they've pushed the traditional liberal/conservative dichotomy of American politics back about 150 years, and moved it roughly 4,000 miles to the east, to the far side of the Rhine River. Their grand existential struggle isn't with the likes of Teddy Kennedy or even Franklin D. Roosevelt, it's with the liberalism of Voltaire, John Locke and John Stuart Mill – not to mention the author of the Declaration of the Independence.

Strauss, in other words, wasn't a neo anything. He was a conservative in the original European sense – fond of hierarchy, tradition and religious orthodoxy; deeply suspicious of newfangled ideas like egalitarianism, rationalism and a political theory based on enlightened self interest and the social contract. Nor was he impressed by Mill's utilitarian adding machine – constantly calculating the greatest good for the greatest number.

To the Straussians, rationality does not provide an adequate basis for a stable social order. To the contrary, the Age of Enlightenment has ushered in the crisis of modernity, in which nihilism – the moral vacuum left behind by the death of God – inevitably leads to decadence, decline and, ultimately, genocide.

That logical leap from Jefferson to Hitler might seem like the intellectual equivalent of Evel Knieval's outlandish attempt to jump the Snake River canyon on a rocket-powered motorcycle. But it's essential to the Straussian world view – just as it provides the crucial angst that gives neo-conservatism such sharp political edges.

When Newt Gingrich equated feminism with the destruction of Western civ, he was echoing (in his dumbed-down way) Strauss's lurking fear that the liberal American state would steer the same course as the Weimar Republic – a political *Titanic* on a collision course with a totalitarian iceberg. Deprived of the moral certainty provided by religion and tradition, the masses are vulnerable to crazed political adventurers who would fill the nihilistic void with their own crackpot ideas – like, say, the international conspiracy of Communists and Freemasons. They might even be *worse* than Tom DeLay. Or, as Drury laconically puts it:

> Strauss . . . does not disagree with Marx that religion is the opium of the masses, he just thinks that people need their opium.

What gives Straussian thought its special flavor – a bitter blend of hypocrisy and cynicism – is the fact that Strauss himself didn't believe in the eternal "truths" he championed. He was a nihilist, in other words – but one who believed only the philosophical elite could be trusted to indulge in such a dangerous vice. In exchange for this privilege, the elite has a special obligation to uphold the "noble lies" the ignorant masses must live by if society is to survive.

What's more, Strauss not only thought this – he believed the ancient philosophers agreed with him, which is why their texts shouldn't be read literally – at least not by the privileged elite. It seems that Strauss, like Madonna, had a thing for Kabbalism. He believed his Greek role models had endowed their Great Books with two very different meanings: one for the elect and one for the masses (like first class and coach, in other words, but with extra frequent flyer miles for the PhDs.) But these secret meanings had been carefully concealed, so as not to scare the children with the awful truth – or, more accurately, the awful *lack* of truth. They *could*, however, be deciphered by wise and virtuous philosophers who understood and shared the classical world view – by Leo Strauss, in other words.

As Drury points out, people who go looking for hidden meanings usually find them. And everywhere

Strauss looked – in the works of Plato, Aristotle and Nietzsche – he found . . . Leo Strauss, staring back up at him from the page. A philosophical case of "incestuous amplification," in other words, a tendency the Straussians have emulated unto the present day, and not just in the Pentagon's E ring.

> The ridicule of the Straussians in the academy is connected to their unquestioning devotion to a set of ideas that they cannot or will not defend except to those who are already converted . . . For they do not want their ideas discussed openly or even known to anyone outside the charmed circle of initiates.

The Populist Ploy

All this would be just another academic exercise – so to speak – if some of the Straussians hadn't turned his philosophical fixations into a political crusade to "save" America from the horrors of modernity. Whether this was originally Strauss's project or something his followers dreamed up later isn't clear, at least not from Drury's book. What *is* clear is that Strauss took great pains to recruit disciples who could transmit his ideas to future generations of impressionable young philosophers. And some of these apostles, such as political scientist Willmoore Kendall, sought to extend his influence to the political as well as the intellectual elite – positioning Strauss as the philosopher behind the philosopher kings.

Through these channels, Straussian ideas have thoroughly penetrated the modern GOP – and not only its avowedly neocon wing. Kendall was William F. Buckley Jr.'s mentor at Yale; Irving Kristol has cited Strauss as a primary influence; Newt Gingrich cribbed heavily from Straussian theory (and tactics) in drafting the Contract On America. Rove and his crew are *born* Straussians – even if they can't spell the word philosophy, much less pronounce it.

One of the Straussians' most important innovations has been to reconcile their brand of elite conservatism with Southern fried demagogic populism ala Huey Long and George Wallace. That's a pretty radical concession for a movement with its mind (or at least its heart) planted firmly in the fifth century BC. But it's solved the traditional dilemma of old-style conservatives in America: How to win power in a society that has no landed gentry, no nobility, no established church – none of Europe's archaic feudal institutions and loyalties.

The rationale – or rationalization – for the populist ploy is that the common folk are a hell of a lot less liberal (again, using the Enlightenment definition of the word) than what the Straussians like to call America's "parchment regime" – that is, the ideas and principles enshrined in the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution. The masses want their opium, in other words, and with the right guidance, will happily sweep away the liberal elites who have been denying it to them.

This, in turn, will set the stage for a golden (or at least silver) age of religious orthodoxy, patriarchal values and a hierarchical corporate capitalism stripped of its original libertarian feistiness – all of it supervised by a moral nanny state freed from the confines of all that "parchment."

National Greatness, indeed.

The Death of the Death of God

There are so many problems with this political vision (insane, potentially catastrophic problems) that it's hard to know where to begin. I can start, I suppose, by attacking the notion that liberalism or secularism – or even nihilism, for that matter – is the royal road to totalitarianism.

Leaving aside the fact that most totalitarian movements are simply imitation religions that feed off the same irrational emotions as the established name brands, there's the rather obvious empirical example

of modern Europe – about as secular and cosmopolitan a society as ever has existed. Europe has its social problems just as America has hers, but it's not obvious they're any worse – in fact, on many indicators (teen pregnancy, drug abuse, violent crime, election turnout, public civility) they're clearly better. Likewise, back at the ranch, the Godless blue states rank, on average, ahead of the Bible-thumping red states on such hot-button morality indicators as divorce, unwed mothers and domestic violence.

So perhaps the masses *don't* need to be spoon fed their religious opium in order to have a reasonably decent society. The death of God may have left the neocon elites trembling with existential dread, but it's possible that everyman and everywoman can go right on loving their children, obeying the laws and finding meaning in life even *without* the old bugger upstairs.

The nihilist threat, in other words, may be the Straussian version of an "inside the beltway" issue – one which paralyzes the philosophical elite but which the rest of the Western world is increasingly inclined to ignore as it tries to get on with daily life. The horrors of the 20th century were unquestionably real, and even more terrible ones may well await us in the 21st. But the horrors of the Thirty Years War, the Holy Inquisition and the Russian pogroms were also real – and it's pretty hard to blame *them* on the death of God.

If there *is* a crisis of modernity, it appears to be more a function of the faithful – some whom are getting awfully violent for a bunch of opium addicts. When the 9/11 terrorists flew their planes into the World Trade Center, I can guarantee you they weren't reciting passages from Mill's *On Liberty*. The real crisis may be the *lack* of modernity, not a surplus of the stuff – an argument the neocons themselves are now making, at least about the religious fanatics in the Middle East.

The ones in Midwest, on the other hand, are another story. To the Straussians, it apparently doesn't matter what *kind* of religious orthodoxy America has – as long as it has one. And so the highly educated followers of a Jewish refugee from demented old Europe have allied themselves with some of the most ignorant, racist and xenophobic people in modern crazy America.

There's a certain irony to this, because it seems Strauss himself had a somewhat ambiguous relationship with fascism. Like many German conservatives, his contempt for Enlightenment values was influenced by the "organic" and "*volkish*" sensibilities of German Romanticism – the same ideological compost heap that eventually sprouted National Socialism.

It's surely no coincidence that Strauss's two leading intellectual mentors – the existentialist philosopher Martin Heidegger and the legal theorist Carl Schmitt – both ended up playing patty cake with the Nazis. Schmitt, in particular, was the parent of a rather chilling political theory in which the struggle against the "other" (whether external or internal) was held to exist outside any moral or ethical constraints. The result was supposed to be the creation of a "pure enemy," one who could not be demonized as evil or immoral even as he was "existentially negated." But Drury points out that in the real world, Schmitt's "negation" could just as easily be interpreted as permission for total war against the enemies of the *volk* – a war of annihilation.

Drury speculates that Schmitt's theories may have influenced Strauss's belief that an external enemy – the "other" – is as necessary as public religion for the health of the state. By derivation, this may also be the source of the neocon fascination with militarism as a sign of national vitality. One can only wonder where Strauss's philosophical journey might have taken him if his Jewishness hadn't made him one of the "pure enemies" to be "existentially negated." It seems the whiff of fascism that surrounds the neocons has real historical antecedents.

The Little Curs

The real threat, however, isn't that the neocons are fascists, but that their cynicism and egoism could open the door to something more like the genuine article.

The Straussians see themselves as the new elite, leading the opium-eating masses back to the Zion of moral certainty and public virtue. But it's a ridiculous fantasy to think the social clock can be turned back by political means – or that the kind of society they desire can be maintained in a highly advanced post-industrial country at the center of rapidly globalizing economy. America isn't Athens. It isn't even Sparta. And it also isn't John Winthrop's "city on the hill, raised up." The old Puritan tradition may still be powerful, but isn't nearly strong enough to serve as the organizing principle for a new/old social order – at least, not without banging a hell of lot of skulls together. As Drury puts it:

> The strategy relies on America's puritanical longing for virtue – a longing that is ultimately incompatible with the love of freedom. The political success of neoconservatism depends on the capacity for the desire for virtue to triumph over the love of freedom.

But love of freedom may not have the edge in that battle. Maybe modernity isn't in crisis, but classic liberalism – and the political institutions it created – is trapped in a dire one. It, too, seems increasingly incompatible with the demands of imperial globalization. And the "parchment regime" that Thomas Jefferson and James Madison gave us is being subverted by the very forces – the executive branch, the corporate media, one and a half of the two major political parties – that are supposed to defend it.

As I've said before, the American constitutional edifice reminds me of a house riddled by termites – it *looks* solid enough from the outside, but lean too hard against a wall and big pieces might start toppling over. And right now, the neocons and their Bible Belt allies are leaning pretty damned hard. There are days (like "Justice Sunday") when the Weimar analogy no longer seems so far fetched.

If we're fortunate – as fortunate as America has been through most of its history – the center will hold. Things won't fall apart. The neocons, having overreached, will be thrown for a big loss and forced to punt. But I'm not as confident as I used to be that the game still works that way.

What's more, if the neocons *did* succeed in tearing up the liberal parchment regime, I seriously doubt they could control the forces they've helped unleash. The Bible fedayeen aren't exactly yearning for a little recycled Plato from the philosophical elite. *Their* version of the city on the hill might not have room for a philosophical elite – not unless it's a fundamentalist Protestant one, which is a contradiction in terms.

The risk, then, is that by unleashing the forces of religious populism to save America from the inevitable consequences of liberal nihilism, the Straussians conceivably could end up assisting the very catastrophe they *claim* they're trying to avoid.

And wouldn't *that* be ironic.

Posted by billmon at April 28, 2005 01:33 AM

Moon of Alabama

And must have whiskey Oh, you know why

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April 28, 2005

Billmon: The Grand Delusion

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The Grand Delusion

Posted by Bernhard on April 28, 2005 at 03:45 AM | Permalink

Comments

Billmon - thanks for that piece

Did I understand you correctly when I say that they are reactionary aristocratic-wannabes? And, knowing that they would never get to power as such, they hitched a ride with national-populists and their growing taliborn again wing, at the obvious risk of being dumped on the way?

Actually, they make me think of Chirac, who's had the luck that the taliborn again wing is almost inexistent in France and it is much easier to ride the chauvinistic populist wing. The Neocons would be right at home in France...

Posted by: JÃ©rÃ´me | April 28, 2005 04:45 AM | #

I'd throw in a dash of manifest destiny with your aristocracy, JÃ©rÃ´me. These guys don't just want to be in charge: they believe they are God's or Fate's or the Universe's chosen ones. They believe they are aristocrats, its just that the masses haven't (hadn't?) worked it out yet.

I'm always thankful when other people read up on this stuff. I keep contemplating reading both Strauss and Rand, but it seems like both would be a waste of time and intestinal fortitude. Strauss was just plain deluded, while Rand's little Objectivist fantasy seems to

break down somewhere in the the first five minutes.

No doubt we're going to have disciples of both wandering around here being insufferable soon. What a lovely idea.

Posted by: Colman | April 28, 2005 04:58 AM | #

Maybe Strauss was a structural Calvinist -- new wine in old bottle.

Posted by: anna missed | April 28, 2005 05:29 AM | #

Brilliant. This may be one of the most important pieces of political philosophy written in the United States in the last 50 years. Billmon has explained things that I dimly suspected, but lacked either the information or the eloquence to express even to myself. The ramifications of his conclusions are supremely frightening.

Billmon's piece fits in perfectly with what Jerome wrote about sand castles. Our castle of freedom -- a castle whose foundations are built explicitly on the Enlightment values of reason and tolerance -- is indeed under siege from a rising tide of religious fundamentalism. Except our castle, fragile though it may be, is built from ideas much stronger than sand -- and if you mix sand with gravel, and heat it, you get concrete. Nor is the fundamentalist tide inexorable; it's more like the mob of villagers in Frankenstein (the movie), driven by fear to burn something they don't understand. A lot of them are drunk on their own brand of Jesus-juice, and the rest are cowards.

I want to think about Billmon's piece more deeply. My immediate reaction, though, is that he has confirmed a conclusion I have reached only reluctantly: that the leaders of the Republican Party in the United States are inimical to the very idea of true freedom, and that we can keep our freedom only by utterly destroying Republican Fundamentalism as a political force. They are like the right-wing Republican in the Virginia General Assembly who wanted to amend a part of the state constitution written by Jefferson and Madison to allow state support for fundamentalist Protestant Christianity. Even other Republicans shouted the idea down. Jefferson was more perceptive asleep than Strauss was fully conscious. And a hell of a lot smarter.

The Constitution may be parchment, but its ideas aren't. Try to tear it apart, and you'll see how strong it really is. Because if you try to tear it apart, we will tear you apart.

I don't see any alternative.

Posted by: Aigin | April 28, 2005 05:48 AM | #

Interesting how Billmon and I drug out those musty quotations of Yeats at around the same time. He's also not kidding about the ironic part at the end. In fact, I would go so far as to suggest ***prophetic*** would be a more accurate term for the Neocons today closely resemble the very mindsets of those Israelites - particularly the Pharisees and Saducees - that had crucified Jesus. Those people were so caught up in their traditions, their culture, and their tight communities and often viewed themselves as constantly victimized and misunderstood but yet they couldn't accurately describe why it is they felt they way they did to anyone they considered an "outsider" -- to do so would reveal too much; would unearth too many skeltons in their closet. They were esentially too pius for their own good. Thus it's no surpize that Jesus' preaching sounded liberal as all hell to their ears and they

viewed it as a threat. What people don't understand, they fear, and what they fear, they ultimately destroy. Sadly, it's not until the destruction begins when they wake up and realize the disaster they've sown for themselves.

Neocons today are Pharisees/Saducees redeux, in my opinion, for they share the same "we're so misunderstood and victimized; woe is me" kind of mindset and -- just like then -- such things as gay rights, abortion, and freedom of/from religion etc. are threats to them for they preach a Gospel that could truly liberate "those whom have ears". As we all know, truth results in freedom while a subverted and undermined truth results in bondage and it is within these grand subversions of truth that keep people under bondage and thus enslaved. The Pharisees & Saducees of yore depended on it in order to keep the status quo in their favor (much like their modern-day Neocon brethren), which wouldn't happen lest the King of The Jews sort of "went away" somehow (I often sit here and wonder if one of the members of the San Hedrin had remarked to Peter at some point later, "Don't you see? We had to kill him in order to save him from himself!" and ended up getting blasted right between the eyes for it)

The ***real*** irony? At least Jesus forgave the Pharisees and Saducees the first time around and - if those prophecy crackpots such as Hal Lindsey and Jack Van Impe are right (or Thomas Jefferson, for that matter) - the modern-day Pharisees and Saducees of yet-to-be-fulfilled endtimes prophecy don't get forgiven at all by the returning Messiah for destroying the world as he know it. On the contrary, they end up getting sodomized by the Lord's foot - the well-deserved punt in the ass that launches them into that Lake of Fire and I can't help but picture Karl Rove snivelling, "But Lord, we had to destroy the world in order to save it from those dirty, abortion-lovin', America-hatin' Liberals," moments before being bodily hurled into everlasting torment.

Couldn't happen to a nicer chap, if you ask me. Too bad it couldn't happen tomorrow! Without all that plagues and pestilences from "Revelation", of course. Alas, this is all just mental masturbation on my part but at least I'm on record in saying that I can't think of a more appropriate form of torment for the Straussians & the Rovians than to languish forever in the bowels of Hell with the knowledge of a returning Jesus possibly being Liberal afterall.

"Much weeping and gnashing of teeth", indeed.

In the meantime, I say we should get a headstart in bringing a proverbial "Hell On Earth" style of torment for the GOP by starting a huge Democratic lovefest for the Sen. Barry Goldwater. I'm talking T-Shirts, hats, and tons of Democrats just gushing over him. Why? For one, the Religious Right loathed Barry Goldwater and I'm sure they danced with joy when he retired not just from politics and from drawing oxygen, too. Secondly, the visage of Barry Goldwater being paraded around by Democrats and Liberals would remind the voters of everthing that conservatism used to stand for (and the GOP of everything they have since forsaken). Sean Hannity would have a goddamned stroke, I guarantee it!

Posted by: Sizemore | April 28, 2005 05:59 AM | #

Incredibly chilling.

I've known intutively since the 80s that a dictatorship in America would have to draw upon

certain aspects of religion perculiar to the US -- but I never could understand how.

Our dear barkeeper demonstrates here the interlocking of two of the elements: neo-conservatism and the cynical use of a religious populism.

But there is lacking at least one more element -- a crisis of some sort, I suppose, to bring it all together in a trifecta of ugly bad luck.

...& if there ever be dictatorship
in these Arrogant States,
I know, without a doubt, that it will wear
a 'religious' face.

& it will scream a dream of permanence
on a fundament
Of broken glass, and rust, and shattered bricks;
in short -- excrement!

& it will call itself 'holy' and
usurp the Holy's place;
& it will manifest nothing but
a total lack of taste.

Posted by: BarfHead | April 28, 2005 06:01 AM | #

What I mean is that a trend that I first saw in Eastern Europe in the 90s has been spreading more and more to the Western world as well: the blurring of the left/right - labor/capital distinctions and their replacement by what I call the social-liberal vs national-populist distinctions, which can also be seen as centrism vs others.

It's quite clear in the French vote on the referendum, the opposition is not between the parties, but within parties between the modernist wings and the more traditional or, dare I say it, reactionary wings. It creates strange alliances at times:

Social-liberalism is the combination of Eisenhower and Clinton (or in Europe: Kohl and Delors): it is broadly pro-market, but not hostile to taxes or a strong State (nor to Unions). It is generally fiscally conservative and socially liberal (with variations). It is open to the world, usually pro-free trade and mostly favorable to globalisation.

National-populism is the combination of Chirac and the communists (same thing, I know), or of Cheney and the NRA. It is focused on protecting, in often simplistic ways, "how things should be", whether the role of the US on the world stage, of men and marriage in society, of blue-collar workers in industry, and religion throughout. It is nationalist, militarist, protectionist, not very open to the rest of the world (in trade or immigration or culture). It likes the State to spend for what it believes in (its jobs, its "values", its pork) but not for other things.

I suppose that from this description, you'll see where I put me in. Maybe I am wrong, or certainly too simplistic, especially about where the middle classes fit in (the above describes a typical bobo vs rednecks fracture, as seen by a bobo...), but I think it is how the neocons see the world - and they see that the "masses" that they like to lead and play with are in the new group, which is more associated with the right rather than the left, so they have turned from troskysts to neocons but are really targetting the same thing (power) by

leveraging the same constituencies (traditional male workers).

Posted by: JÃ©rÃ´me | April 28, 2005 06:26 AM | #

I have come to the conclusion that George W. Bush is an alien:

> Captain.
> I've created a condition ...
> in which Gill cannot initiate speech, or any other action,
> but he can reply to questions.
>
> Well done, Spock.
> They've kept what's left of him as a figure head.
>
> Quite correct. For the last few years,
> the real power has been Melakon.
>
> Gill.
> Gill, why did you abandon your mission?
> Why did you interfere with this culture?
>
> Planet ...
> fragmented ...
> divided.
> Took lesson from Earth history.
>
> Why Nazi Germany?
> You studied history. You knew what the Nazis were.
>
> Most efficient state ...
> Earth ever knew.
>
> Quite true, captain.
> That tiny country -- beaten, bankrupt, defeated,
> rose in a few years to stand ...
> only one step away from global domination.
>
> But it was brutal, perverted,
> had to be destroyed at a terrible cost.
> Why that example?
>
> Perhaps Gill felt that such a state, run benignly,
> could accomplish its efficiency without sadism.
>
> Why, Gill?
> Why?
>
> Worked.
> At first ...
> it worked.
> Then Melakon ...
> began to take over.

Used the --
Gave me the drug.

Gill.
Gill.
Gill, can you hear me?
You've got to tell those people what happened!
You're the only one who can prevent the slaughter!
Gill!

Posted by: Franz Moleman | April 28, 2005 06:48 AM | #

The Straussians have always been Straussians - but at one time many of the most prominent were Democrats - and what seems to be a defining quality of many "Neocons" is their migration to the Republican party. This article makes me wonder - how was it that these people once felt that the Democratic party was a more comfortable home for their views than the Republican?

Posted by: NickM | April 28, 2005 07:59 AM | #

Stunning piece! I lived with a Straussian 40 years ago when we were grad students at Yale. I could never get my mind around the hermeneutics of what he was trying to explain, except the part about how philosophy is to dangerous for the masses.

One often senses things before one can articulate them. I sensed several years ago that the current regime was a throwback to Demaistre and the rest of the Bourbon Restoration crew. I thought it might have come out of corporate culture, where the boss is really and completely boss. It's odd how many strands have come together: Corporate hierarchy, Bush's upbringing -- a kind of Bertie Wooster without the charm -- the Straussian thrust into the Conservative movement; the anti-scientific movement. It is a perfect storm.

Having said all that, I believe the center will hold. The sign that it isn't holding will be the onset of political assassination. Let's keep our fingers crossed.

Posted by: Knut Wicksell | April 28, 2005 08:09 AM | #

i'm not so sure the centre will hold

a comrade from moon has sent me a 'harpers' with two very substatantial articles on the evangilical ministries in colorado & elsewhere

i know europeans do not completely undersstand the actual political power possessed & utilised by these ministries & the depth of their criminal & sinister theology which is in deep & utter accord with the strausses, schmitts & heideggers

i imagine europe regards these groups as isolated nutcases - not as the avantgarde of an even more horrific politics than we are living today

at he end of the day minor intellectual theorists in their domain are no threat rahter it reflects on the spiritual & philosophic poverty of the elites. strauss is a nincompoop, schmitt is an able but extremely perverse legal scholar & heidegger contrary to being the god of 20th century philosophy is the mediocre meanderings of a mendacious middle class autoritarian who while betraying husserl & stealing from him - thought he was the gods that

nietzsche spoke of - but was instead - a mindless rector - of a comprimised german scholarship

the very real threat are the thugs for god & their ministries explosing all over the world with their evil works & their very real thoughtlessness which is quite capable of leading us into catastrophe

because the worst act of elite theorists is that they believe what they say & become the caricatures they really are & forge alliance with forces that posess the real weight that will destroy them also

wasn't it christ who said when i left childhood i gave away childish things - it seems the american elites have stayed, worked & created staes & empires from that playpen

Posted by: remembereringgiap | April 28, 2005 08:27 AM | #

fwiw, this link to a John Kaminski musing entitled "Deer In The Headlights" (from a Kate_Storm comment over at All Spin Zone) offers up more *tinfoil-hat* commentary re the **psycopaths** running the asylum.

> "To **not** be afraid is to be stupid."

(adding an *aberrant psychology* piece to your politco-philosophical puzzle, Billmon)

Posted by: andrew in caledon | April 28, 2005 08:50 AM | #

Billmon knocks it out of the park with his latest piece. What I find particularly intriguing is his hypothesis that the current neocons have found a way to form a productive (or perhaps a better word would be destructive) alliance between religious/moralistic fascists that Huey Long and George Wallace sought.

In my mind, the current alliance between the neocons and the moneyed elite/unfettered capitalists of Republicans with the religious right is at the heart of their power. The objectives of each group--the religious right and the intellectual/capitalistic aristocracy of the Straussians--- cannot succeed without each other. Moreover, both are about maintaining and expanding their spheres of influence and concentration of power. Each of these group's goals are about power. The difference is that one group--the moneyed capitalist elite is dependent upon the moralistic crusaders of the religious right to distract the sheeple so both groups can profit. In many ways, this is no different than the Catholic Church's collusion with the early and burgeoning aristocracy of medieval Europe. The aristocracy was dependent upon the gift of the "divine right of kings" from the Church while the Church was responsible for mollifying the fears of the sheeple and keeping them passive so they would not rebel against being economically raped by the royalty. Both groups profited handsomely for centuries from this convenient arrangement.

We are seeing the same situation play out here in America today. We have the attempts by the neocons and Republicans to shift more wealth to fewer people and manufacture faux crises, while the religious fundamentalists make hay out of social ills that have no affect on the believers if they chose to not participate in the "decadence" of others. But the goals of each group are the same--power.

The American Taliban of the religious right is colluding with the Republicans with the deal being that the American Taliban gives the political and monetary support of the "offended

white man" of lower and middle class America so that moneyed elite and business interests can accumulate more wealth by the economic rape of the lower and middle classes of America. This is essentially a different twist on the collusion between the Catholic Church and the royals of Europe for much of its history. The Church takes the souls and money of the poor in order to distract the sheeple from the fact that the royalty was taking the fruits of their labor. In America today, the story is the same, but the economic elite arenâ€™t viewed as royalty and there are more factions of the religious right splitting the economic spoils and power of control of their flocks (and letâ€™s not forget the money that the modern day Elmer Gantryâ€™s are raking in).

This religious collusion with political power has played out before in every one of the monotheistic religions. But this is nothing new here in America with the exceptions I touch on below. Robert Frank touches on it in his book "What's the matter with Kansas?â€• Sinclair Lewis speaks to the issue in fictional terms based on public figures in "It Can't Happen Here" and the horrid consequences that the political-religious alliance can have. Lewis's "Elmer Gantryâ€• encapsulates the modern cynicism of current religious leaders and their lust for power at the expense of their so-called faith.

The real key to the alliance between the neocons/Republicans and the religious right is, as Billmon briefly touches on, the attack on encroaching modernity by the religious right and the neocons recognition and exploitation of this conflict. Karen Armstrong illustrates the recurring clash of modernity with peoples of faith in the "Battle for God". This clash of modernity with faith has happened in Christianity, Judaism and Islam with surprising regularity. What is unique and frightening now is the effectiveness in an established political system--and the party controlling that system, the Republicans--in harnessing the unfounded fears of religious fundamentalists with societal change.

Posted by: WyldPirate | April 28, 2005 09:41 AM | #

Speaking of Rand...

Posted by: Blind Misery | April 28, 2005 09:51 AM | #

as a follow-up to my previous post, perhaps I should have used the term "sociopath" as per this article, "The Killers (and Liars) in Our Midst" and this statistic:
"While the percentage of true sociopaths is debated - Stout contends it is 4 percent of the population, or one person in 25, while others believe it is one in 100 or fewer - experts do agree on what characterizes them."
Even at 1%, in a population of 300+ million, that's **3,000,000** *'muricans* that qualify, and if we assume that being WASP is not a necessary and sufficient condition, then that means 60,000,000 worldwide!
Oh joy, oh joy.

Posted by: andrew in caledon | April 28, 2005 10:02 AM | #

"The sign that it isn't holding will be the onset of political assassination."
Well, alas you're several decades late. The Kennedys, MLK, Paul Wellstone, etc...

Billmon's piece was very enlightening. And from what I see, I agree with him that if they get complete power, they won't be able to rule together this time. The ancient regime of Europe with church and nobility ruling hand in hand won't work, because both sides want

the whole cake for them and are too extremist to compromise. It's like the Talibornagains supporting the Orthodox Jews - they're just using each other to promote their own goals who are ultimately opposed to each other.

WyldPirate: "This clash of modernity with faith has happened in Christianity, Judaism and Islam with surprising regularity"
Probably linked to religion, but it's a bit broader than that. When there's massive turmoil coupled with quickly changing world and society, people go back to mythical golden age, which can often be mystical mumbo-jumbo (hardcore Salafism, Falwell, Shas party). It also helped big time the Nazis to rise to power during the Weimar era.

Posted by: | April 28, 2005 10:08 AM | #

One bit of a warning though, don't let the Right claim God as their's. Everything doesn't have to be either or. Since the colonial period there has been a battle over the definition of God between the Fundamentalists and the Spark of God Religions. The Fundamentalists believing that a few chosen are saved and the rest of humanity are damned have used this as an excuse for elitist policies including genocide of the Native Americans, exploitation of land and labor, and of course slavery. But the Spark of God religions-like the Unitarians and Quakers, believing that the spark of God is found within each man therefore "none above none below"-have been the leaders of abolition, labor rights, and women's rights. The progressive movement must remember its' 19th century history, and reclaim it's more positive definition of God.

Posted by: middleoftheroadnot | April 28, 2005 10:32 AM | #

> a trend that I first saw in Eastern Europe in the 90s has been spreading more and more to the Western world as well: the blurring of the left/right - labor/capital distinctions and their replacement by what I call the social-liberal vs national-populist distinctions, which can also be seen as centrism vs others.

I think it's the back to the future thing again. For most of the 20th century, the basic political divide was between liberalism (in both its classic and New Deal forms) and Marxism -- with the fascists popping up as a "third force" in countries where the struggle became especially intense.

But now that Marxism has been vanquished, the political dialectic is returning to the familiar 19th century conflict between liberals and conservatives -- with the liberals standing (just as they did back then) for globalization, individualism and the caretaker state, and the conservatives standing for tradition, hierarchy and the authoritarian nationalist state.

Actually, from a Marxist perspective, you could argue that it makes a certain sense: With the recreation of the late 19th century economic base (capitalist globalization) it's logical that the political superstructure would follow.

But, in the USA at least, neither of the major parties is internally aligned to the new fault line. The GOP cheers for both economic conservativism (i.e. Manchester liberalism)*and* Straussian social conservatism -- which is much closer to the original 19th century meaning of the word.

The Dems, meanwhile, include both New Democrats (i.e. kinder, gentler Manchester liberals) and Social Democrats -- who, on some cultural issues at least, are more traditional

and communitarian. Many of the Straussians, after all, used to *be* Social Democrats.

This obviously leads to a lot of confusion and tension. But it's hard to see how the parties can realign themselves to eliminate the inconsistencies, since the Social Democrats have nothing in common with the hard core Manchester liberals of the GOP and the religious conservatives hate the Godless secular New Democrats.

Which just highlights the fact that the return to the politics of the 19th century has a kind of weird and artificial feel to it. It's like the Europe the winners tried to reassemble after the Napoleonic Wars -- as if the French Revolution had never happened, and the industrial revolution was irrelevant to the political order.

The system hung together, sort of, but it was never very stable (1832, 1848, 1870, etc.) And when the autocratic powers finally stumbled into a general war, it abruptly collapsed -- allowing the revolutionary left to come roaring back.

History never repeats, and the revolutionary left looks a lot more like road kill than any kind of credible threat to the recreated capitalist world order. But the system *is* unstable -- because the capitalist world order of the 19th century hasn't *really* been recreated. It can't be, because the world has changed too much in a 125 years.

So the stage does seem to be set for some interesting times down the road -- and maybe not that far down the road. It took 100 years to go from the Congress of Vienna to Sarajavo. But time moves a lot faster these days.

Posted by: billmon | April 28, 2005 10:51 AM | #

Anti-liberalism definitely seems on the rise in this country. Generally, elite political debate since World War II has largely been between progressive liberal and conservative liberal visions. Both those seeking a larger government role and a smaller government role in one or another policy spheres disagreed on the application of liberal principles to policy, but largely agreed on the centrality of those principles in the political debate.

The exploitation of the fears created by 9/11, the rise in the power of religious absolutists, traditional anti-intellectualism and the prominence of political leaders who appear fundamentally anti-liberal at heart have all contributed to this trend.

Liberalism, the national secular religion in some sense, has also become a prop in the hands of anti-liberal forces. Ritualistic invocations of freedom and democracy used as "opium for the masses" by those who may in reality be highly skeptical of those values except as a means for manipulation.

In some ways, the most disturbing aspect of the Straussians is their apparent cult-like status and their unwillingness to intellectually engage on core principles with those outside their circle. This view seems to permeate the Bush Administration for one reason or another. Information and the rationale behind policy choices are held so closely that policy suffers as a result as ideological impulses are unchallenged by argument or reality.

My biggest fear is that any economic deterrioration in the US economy will result less in a repudiation of those forces currently in power than in the further strengthening of fundamentally anti-liberal forces. I am less certain than I was that the relatively successful history of liberalism in America will be enough of a bulwark against these forces, especially as they adopt a patina of liberalism as their rhetorical cover.

Posted by: Ben Brackley | April 28, 2005 10:56 AM | #

Probably linked to religion, but it's a bit broader than that. When there's massive turmoil coupled with quickly changing world and society, people go back to mythical golden age, which can often be mystical mumbo-jumbo (hardcore Salafism, Falwell, Shas party). It also helped big time the Nazis to rise to power during the Weimar era.

Posted by: | April 28, 2005 04:08 PM | #

You certainly have a reasonable point, but I think it is different than the one I'm trying to make.

In your example, the Nazis **rose to power** and displaced the Weimar Republic in the aftermath of the post-WWI catastrophe that caused economic and political crisis in Germany. Of course one could argue that WW-I was caused, in part, by the century and a half-long demise of monarchical domination of European states beginning with the French Revolution and attribute the resultant rise in German nationalism under Bismark in the latter half of the 19th century and labled this as a crisis of encroaching modernity. However, the Nazi's worked from the **outside** of political power in post-WW I to overthrow the Weimar Republic--not from within.

My point was that the alliance between the political power of the Republicans--who unquestionably completely control all three branches of governemt--and the religious right, is, I think, unparalled in the modern history of democratic states. The alliance of the neocons/Republicans and religious fascists are are doing their evil **from within the system**.

Now I'll be the first to admit that I am not a political historian, but I can't think of any other modern parallel in a modern democracy other than perhaps the Likud Party's collusion/origin amongst Zionists in Israel. Even with the Likkudniks, there has been a fracture since the origin of the party and the hardcore religiously orthodox Zionists.

I suppose what I was saying is that what we are seeing today in America is a social and cultural revolution from within the government that harnesses religious "fundamentalists".

Posted by: WyldPirate | April 28, 2005 10:59 AM | #

I believe it is the blending of all the different influences that will dictate the outcome.
the Strausssian idealogues, the christian hungerites and the self loathers all spew thier points of view with an eye towards something else, only they don't mesh and the result is going to anarchy or destruction.
The powers that be are so screwed up that the various interests that are competing for dominance will eat each other and attempt to take us all down and of course they all believe it is really what we need and want.

Posted by: jimmyjazz | April 28, 2005 11:28 AM | #

Holy Hell, this piece synthesised a lot of questions that have cropped up lately.

How much education do people need to serve a function in society? I think perhaps 8th grade is a good cut off. After that, they might start questioning things better left to thier "betters". By 8th grade you can read People magazine and USA Today. You can figure out the instructions on your Tivo and have a baby and drive a car and read your credit card bill and be tried as an adult in a court of law. It is a perfect moment in the Straussian

worldview. And if people won't stop questioning their government (which "knows best", just like father) than maybe God needs to step in (because you certainly can't question God).

I've heard Strauss bandied about in the neocon circles, but this is the first time I really "got it".

Posted by: Super Ju | April 28, 2005 11:32 AM | #

Although I probably shouldn't say this, we here in the uber-Straussian community think we finally have these Straussian patsies playing their rolls perfectly.

If you have eyes to see and ears to see, watch this week's Everybody Loves Raymond for your instructions!

Posted by: wetzel | April 28, 2005 11:44 AM | #

I find it ironic that it takes a Canadian (liberal) to talk about the Neocons in America. lol!

I guess it must have something to with seeing the ideologies and frustrations that operate in plain sight in soceity that the natives are only dimly aware of, but foreigners see clearly.

I'm reminded of the end of Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale where a group of Canadian academics try and piece together the fall of the Republic of Gilead.

I hope the center holds together in the US, but I fear religious populism will tear it apart in ways that Atwood alludes to.

Posted by: The Key | April 28, 2005 11:51 AM | #

> I can't think of any other modern parallel in a modern democracy other than perhaps the Likud Party's collusion/origin amongst Zionists in Israel

A more ominous parallel would the traditional conservative parties in Weimar Germany, who allowed Hitler to take power in the belief that they could control him.

Posted by: Billmon | April 28, 2005 11:51 AM | #

Hi,

While you're reviewing Strauss, you may want to take a look at Thomas Carlyle, too. Similar attitude only focused more on on the military than religion. Essentially, Carlyle maintains that the function of the state is to provide a strong military, and the function of the people is to feed it and shut up.

The Carlyle Group claims to be named after the Carlyle Hotel in New York. But the Carlyle Hotel claims to be named after Thomas Carlyle.

They're not even subtle, really.

John

Posted by: John | April 28, 2005 11:58 AM | #

Thank you, Billmon, WyldPirate, et al.

I believe there is one factor--one other opiate, if you will--that the GOP has harnessed, and that is oil. Those groundlings who do not respond to the comforting allure of religious heirarchies are captive to the comforts that the oil economy has provided.

It has not been in the interests of the monied elites to disturb this addiction or to even discuss the dangers. And far from manufacturing faux crises, this nexus of lies propagated by powerful elites from the religious and economic spheres will prove disastrous to our now infantilized nation.

Posted by: SG | April 28, 2005 12:09 PM | #

Fascinating, I'll have to get that book. Billmon's piece brings together many sprouts of ideas that seem to be floating around.

> A more ominous parallel would the traditional conservative parties in Weimar Germany, who allowed Hitler to take power in the belief that they could control him.

I think this is spot on, but who is going to step up to the plate? Bush Junior obviously doesn't have the fortitude, even though "they" have built up the scaffolding for a Dear Leader.

Posted by: idook | April 28, 2005 12:14 PM | #

he capitalist world order of the 19th century hasn't really been recreated. It can't be, because the world has changed too much in a 125 years.

I'm sort of glad you threw this in because you seemed to forget the central "ideology" justifying power is capitalism.

All of the sub rosa elitism of Straussianism might make more sense if the folly of capitalist development was included as a focus. I recently attended a lecture by Krauthammer (most deadly quadriplegic who has ever lived) who heroically defended neoconservatism by all means *except* a critique of capital. It is not so much by religious/cultural diversions the plebes are guided through history. More than anything, it is the ideology of capital as *natural* which assures the endurance of the de jure plutonic philosopher-king(s). For this reason alone, nothing intellectual separates straussians from the predictably ultiumate negotiation of economic crisis by fascism. There is no irony whatsoever the present fascism is inspired by an old European Jew.

So, only in the liberalism of Marx et al., is the problem of ideology confronted as actual material relations among persons, i.e., as the basis of domination solved only by socialism.

If only I had the time to kindly turn off krauthammer's chair in order to restore the man's faith in the charity of others...

Posted by: slothrop | April 28, 2005 12:19 PM | #

Also, Nietzsche cannot be used, except only by the crudest dissimulation of his work, as a model for neoconservatism.

Posted by: slothrop | April 28, 2005 12:23 PM | #

This isn't a post about Leo Strauss, it's a post about Shadia Drury! The Barkeep hasn't

mentioned a single piece by Strauss, and shows no sign of having read a single piece by Strauss. To write about Strauss without reading him--reading only someone else's account of his work (whether good, bad or indifferent)--is like writing about Machiavelli on the "strength" of reading Strauss about Machiavelli without having read the actual writings of Machiavelli. It's like confusing the words of various "Straussians" on the writings of "Strauss" with the words of Strauss himself. The only "grand delusion" at work here is the Barkeep's irony-free conviction that you can read someone without also actually reading him (call it the "Cliff Notes Delusion," if you will).

Posted by: alabama | April 28, 2005 12:46 PM | #

Wow!!! I'd write more but I've got to get to Border's to pick up Drury's book. You've a first class mind Billmon...keep writing.

The Whiskey Bar....stimulant for the mass mind.

Posted by: CybScryb | April 28, 2005 12:59 PM | #

Nietzsche cannot be used, except only by the crudest dissimulation of his work

And that, according to Drury, is what Strauss did.

The only "grand delusion" at work here is the Barkeep's irony-free conviction that you can read someone without also actually reading him

So sue me.

Posted by: Billmon | April 28, 2005 01:01 PM | #

Great analysis, Billmon. I can add a footnote to the analysis. Many years ago, as a callow political science graduate student at a convention, events conspired to find me in a lengthy discussion/debate with Willmoore Kendall. My footnote to the analysis comes from that evening:it apparently does matter to the neocons which version of religion is the masses' opium. Kendall despised any version of liberal Christianity and Social Gospel adherents and disciples. Push to shove, they prefer the fundamentalists of whatever stripe. The irony, as you say, is, having helped create the monster it is not at all clear they can contain or control it. But to be done in by one's PREFERRED monster! Aye, there's the rub.
Charles

Posted by: charles | April 28, 2005 01:05 PM | #

I won't sue you, Billmon, I'll just cite you.

Posted by: alabama | April 28, 2005 01:15 PM | #

Benjamin admired intellectual cabbalism. Honestly, I'm not sure why. It makes sense reactionary intellectuals would prefer to convene in bat caves (think: 'skull & bones'). But, I don't understand why revolutionary intellectuals would ever prefer the arcane over the popular.

Posted by: slothrop | April 28, 2005 01:21 PM | #

What a pleasure and a relif to see the real war addressed.

Five concerns.

1. Will the Anglo American tradition get this Conteniental infection? There never has been a European left in America, as marxism demonstrated. Has America lost its immunity? If so, why?

2. This is (my pet theme) a COMPETITIVE failure. The "perfect storm" may have arrived, but, it was UNOPPOSED. Who defends "modernity" or "liberalism" or even the "market" as a liberal institution? If someone is doing it, I am missing it. The "liberal" blog sites, for example, aren't interested or up to the challenge faced here.

3. None of this would be possible without a culture of political correctness. Much of the modern American "conservative" is pure, proven, bullshit, that, is protected by "liberal" bullshit. Take Scalia's "originalism" for example, which is a perfect illustration of Conteniental conservatism that has no legitimate place in American Constitutional law. He gets away with it. Its bullshit and he gets away with it. Tons of law journals and hundreds of well paid law professors, all dignifying "originalism" bullshit. If wichan is valid, so is originalism.

4. Strauss non sense lines up nicely with Opus Dei and a Pope who claims he prayed not to be voted in as Pope, which, somehow seems Straussian at some brain stem level of self deceipt.

5. The "irony" view of the Straussian mistake is too generous. Any educated person knows better than to believe Southern fundamentalist belligerence is going to toady to some eggheads. There is at the core some emotional failure common across the modern intellectual conservative spectrum that is caught in the phrase "autistic economics." And how does one intellectually contest what is actually a crippled emotional need?

Posted by: razor | April 28, 2005 01:22 PM | #

alabama

Am presently reading *Persecution and the art of writing* by Strauss and can only say w/ weak confidence the esoteric meaning of great texts stressed by Strauss seems to point not to a kind of deconstruction or attack on myth/natural meaning/denotation, but a revelation of Truth for smart initaites.

But, I have to internalize this material before intelligently commenting.

Posted by: slothrop | April 28, 2005 02:00 PM | #

I have a problem with the ideas presented here. We haven't had truly liberal leadership in America for at least the last half century. Maybe Eisenhower was the last true credible President that hated war and warned about the dangers of the military/industrial/congressional complex. Clinton set the stage for many problems going on today with policies such as NAFTA, Kosovo, etc. I would argue that he was part and parcel of these guys, only slightly more moderate and more clever at it. I could never bring myself to vote for him, and I pretty reliably vote Democratic.If Hilary runs, I am out of the Democratic Party.

I also argue with the premise that globalization is a good thing. I also think that history does repeat itself constantly with a few variations. Look at the period before WWI; the

world was as highly globalized (maybe even more so than today) and things did fall apart. Britain and Germany were major trading partners and that didn't stop WWI. No group of people in the world actually supports globalization unless they think that they can use it to run the world. USA in the 90's, China today. The tensions caused by these disparte groups fighting over the resouces available, generallly leads to big trouble. Look at Latin America right now; great instability caused by neoliberal economics. After all, it is bad government and corruption that causes most economic problems, two problems often exacerbated by globalization.

All the powers that be in this country support a sort of statist/corporate state. Both parties care more about social issues than the economic well being of the people. Shame on them.

Posted by: la | April 28, 2005 02:12 PM | #

This was a great post in terms of historical context and present-correspondence(s), but perhaps the vocabularly needs to be distilled down to more understandable/universal elements available at some point before anyone moves to action.

All not-totalitarians (not-neocons, included) need to work on showing the correspondence between different types of totalitarianism (religious, political, rational, etc) and **the basic lower-human-nature, ego-based commonality** which drives them all (and which are not merely, "facts" of human nature, but rather dis-functions of human nature). Naming the behavior of malcontents in simpler terms is necessary to strip them of any complexity or nuances to hide behind (from themselves or others), and importantly helps provide a detached, non-personal platform (e.g., *'this "problem" of yours, GWB, is what everybody is dealing with, just in varying amounts, but that doesn't make it good, innate, or inescapable!'*.

Being "confronted" by such an approach, which forces the malcontents to "own" their behavior, can be very disarming and effective as Gandhi, King, and others have shown...

Posted by: Caleb | April 28, 2005 02:14 PM | #

From transcript of "The Power of Nightmares"

> Strauss believed that the liberal idea of individual freedom led people to question everythingâ€”all values, all moral truths. Instead, people were led by their own selfish desires. And this threatened to tear apart the shared values which held society together. But there was a way to stop this, Strauss believed. It was for politicians to assert powerful and inspiring myths that everyone could believe in. They might not be true, but they were necessary illusions. One of these was religion; the other was the myth of the nation. And in America, that was the idea that the country had a unique destiny to battle the forces of evil throughout the world. This myth was epitomized, Strauss told his students, in his favorite television program: Gunsmoke.
>
> Professor STANLEY ROSEN, Pupil of Leo Strauss 1949: Strauss was a great fan of American television. Gunsmoke was his great favorite, and he would hurry home from the seminar, which would end at, you know, 5:30 or so, and have a quick dinner so he could be at his seat before the television set when Gunsmoke came on. And he felt that this was good, this show. This had a

> salutary effect on the American public, because it showed the conflict between good and evil in a way that would be immediately intelligible to everyone.
>
> Leo Straussâ€™ other favorite program was Perry Mason. And this, he told his students, epitomized the role that they, the Ã©lite, had to play. In public, they should promote the myths necessary to rescue America from decay. But in private, they didnâ€™t have to believe in them.

Posted by: beq | April 28, 2005 02:40 PM | #

Funny, I was also quoting Heine over at Americablog in an entry about an Alabama Senator's suggestion that all books referring to homosexuality should be banned. Heine noted (back during the beginning of the fight over egalitarian Enlightenment vs. State/Church control--i.e. the long revolutionary/backlash era):

Where they have burned books, they will end in burning human beings. (Dort, wo man BÃ¼cher verbrennt, verbrennt man am Ende auch Menschen) --Heinrich Heine, From his play Almansor (1821)

rgiap- I'm glad someone sent you the latest edition of Harper's. I'd advise others to pick up a copy here, too. (the May issue.)

Jeff Sharlet, who wrote about Jesus Plus Nothing said he left out parts where the men in this group talked about using the "Hitler Concept," or the "Pol Pot concept" --all in the service of their idea (and their idea only) of Christianity--defined as being the human translators of Jesus-ness.

"The group is partial to men who ruled with absolute power: Mao, Pol Pot, and -- you guessed it -- ol' Adolf. They are not Nazis. I repeat: They are not Nazis. Many, in fact, are genuinely dedicated to human rights abroad, the poor at home, and peaceful conflict resolution...What they have in common is a belief in the organizational models offered by dictators, the real problem with which, they think, is their neglect of Jesus. Imagine if Hitler had been working for Jesus, they suggest. Well, you be the judge of how desirable that'd be. "

This is the rationalization that allows the standard bearers for the religious right to embrace fascism without calling it fascism, and this is the place where their ideology intersects with Strauss. (and, btw, Alabama--I have read some Strauss, and I cannot see where Billmon gets it wrong in any way.)

Sharlet's earlier article was backed up by Pulitzer prize winner Lisa Getter in the LATimes, archived here

The Institute thinks that religious diplomacy, conducted by private individuals, is the way to "fix" the world's problems.

Douglas Johnston, who heads the International Center for Religion & Diplomacy in Washington and is a former Fellowship board member, said faith-based diplomacy is the hallmark of the Fellowship. He said the Fellowship has kept its actions low-key because people might wrongly assume it is crossing the line of church-state separation.

"People forget what separation of church and state is supposed to be all about," he said. "Freedom of religion is not freedom from religion."

--that last sentence is the catch phrase for all those who want to elide the separation of church and state--

Anyway, back to the latest edition of Harper's. Former war coorespondent Chris Hedges, author of *War is Force that Gives Us Meaning*, (here's an article by him from The Nation), wrote the other Harper's article, called " Feeling the Hate with the National Religious Broadcasters."

His closing comments in the article discuss his old professor, Dr. James Luther Adams, at Harvard Divinity School who told his ethics class *that when we were his age, and he was then close to eighty, we would all be fighting the "Christian fascists."*.

This was 25 years ago, with the onset of Pat Robertson as the face of Domionism. Adams, back then, saw the parallels to fascism and its nastiest variant, Nazism.

Adams told us to watch closely the Christian right's persecution of homosexuals....noting that after the ban on homosexual publications, [by Nazis] there were raids, then a public bonfire of books from The Institute for Sexual Science.

(here, the Kinsey Institute, where I live, would be the equivalent, I suppose.)

Homosexuals and lesbians, Adams said, would be the first "deviants" singled out by the Christian right. We would be the next.

Alabama Bill Targets Gay Authors

Republican Alabama lawmaker Gerald Allen says homosexuality is an unacceptable lifestyle. As CBS News Correspondent Mark Strassmannreports, under his bill, public school libraries could no longer buy new copies of plays or books by gay authors, or about gay characters.

"I don't look at it as censorship," says State Representative Gerald Allen. "I look at it as protecting the hearts and souls and minds of our children."

I agree with Billmon that the neocons are like the Junkers who thought they could use nationalism (in this case, fundamentalist "Jesusism") to maintain and hold power. German nationalism, just like the current American coalition between the neocons and the Domionists, was founded on a hatred for the modern...for Enlightenment ideals.

Anti-semitism wasn't strictly about Jewishness...it was also about the idea that Jews were liberal, or social democrats, or that they were responsible for Bolshevism. In other words, in the beginning, it was a political struggle that became a genocide. When it was to the point of genocide, it didn't matter what your politics were. Jewish identification was all that mattered...including if you were married to a Jew.

And remember, too, that Hitler took years...nearly a decade... to come to the "final solution." At first he tried to force Jews (and others) to emigrate. It was only after the battles in Russia, with wholesale slaughter, mass murders of villages, that the idea of forced emigration to Uganda or part of Russia was deemed too difficult...combined with food shortages.

And, as I read recently, and do not know where to attribute it, in western Europe, with its treaties on the treatment of prisoners, casualties and mass slaughter was not as bad. However, in the east, in the battles with Russia, mass slaughter was the norm.

Something to keep in mind as the Bush administration justifies torture and a repeal of the Geneva conventions as "not applicable" in the current circumstances.

Posted by: fauxreal | April 28, 2005 02:44 PM | #

Billmon is more or less right about Strauss' philosophy, although it is a bit more complex and thought out than Billmon suggests. Not that it's any good, it's not even when it's explained more carefully.

But Billmon is right that the Straussians and the neocons have their most serious beef with Enlightenment thought. Strauss is completely wrong that the Enlightenment ideas are ultimately behind fascist and communist theory. However, this line of reasoning was also quite acceptable to the left as well. It is bogus. Modern liberalism is the heir to the Enlightenment traditions of Voltaire, Locke, Spinoza and many others. Neo-conservatism, fascism and the politics of the American christianist right devolves from the views of the opponents of Enlightenment thought.

This is all laid out in a fascinating book called "Reclaiming the Enlightenment" by Stephen Bronner. It can be found at this url:

Link

One more point. Billmon equates fundamentalism with pre-modern religious thought. Not quite. Fundamentalist movements are a reaction to modernist trends; they have little independent life outside modernism.

Posted by: tristero | April 28, 2005 02:45 PM | #

b or Jerome- can you fix tristero's html? it's busting the margins.

Posted by: fauxreal | April 28, 2005 02:49 PM | #

In a considerable number of countries which, for about a hundred years, have enjoyed a practically complete freedom of public discussion, that freedom is now suppressed and replaced by a compulsion to coordinate speech with such views as the government believes to be expedient, or holds in all seriousness. It may be worth our while to consider briefly the effect of that compulsion, or persecution, on thoughts as well as actions.

"Esoteric," slothrop?

Posted by: alabama | April 28, 2005 03:02 PM | #

Two years ago I had a happenstance encounter with Joseph Cropsey, the executor of Strauss's writings. I asked him to explain it to me and he replied that the key was Machiavelli spilling the beans, as it were. I then asked what kind of man was Strauss, and he replied "Can we ever truly Know a man?"
That pretty much told me that I could read Strauss as closely as is possible, along with all the rest, and it doesn't make a person know shit.

Posted by: dk | April 28, 2005 03:18 PM | #

I think the most interesting part of this post to me is the genesis of the right-wing love affair with slippery slope arguments. Following the political philosohpy of Strauss, this same view can be found in Hayek's economic philosophy. Is it any wonder that these were men of nearly the same era and the same place. My political economy prof. in undergrad believed that Hayek's view was correct when contextualized within his circumstances i.e. the rise of social-totalitarianism in his native Austria, but inadequate if looked at the experience of other social democracies. However is not this the crux of the problem, for these folks believe to make such assertions is to subscribe to what Pope Benedict XVI referred to as a "dictatorship of relativism" during his homily when he was still know as Ratzo Rizzo, aka Cardinal Ratzinger. And should I also point out that Ratzo is also German?

Is it not absurd that these folks take anecdotal evidence, based on a single example (see Tierney's NYT column on Chile's SocSec system for more on this), draft a whole theory around it and apply it to all circumstances. Is it not more absurd but that to point this out makes one succeseptible to their own invented largest of all evils, relativism. It is a convenient circular and self-reinforcing argument that they have fashioned. Unfortunately, it is lost on logic, so bring in faith!

Posted by: Bubb Rubb | April 28, 2005 03:28 PM | #

More Thos Frank on American populism as manipulated by the Straussians and the curious dexterity w/which the Right embraces class distinction on the "culture war front" but denies its very existence where it really counts: money, employment, taxation, housing, health care, food, environmental toxicity, military service...

And now a digression... Strauss' insistence on "secret readings" to be found in standard texts, accessible only to the initiated, smacks to me of classic delusional/paranoid behaviour. It's a common delusion among mentally ill persons to believe that they, and they alone, can intuit or decipher the hidden messages in newspaper articles, radio broadcasts, TV shows, street signage etc. It is as if the semiotic function of the brain were hypertrophied, desperately seeking meaning out of noise, in a flurry of false pattern recognition.

I knew a guy once who was a ardent Baconian. A perfectly harmless and quite bright fellow, he spent his spare time on an intricate, never-ending numeric analysis of the text of Shakespeare's plays in an attempt to prove to his own and others' satisfaction that they were actually written by F Bacon. Frankly Strauss' hermeneutic/hierophantic approach to classical texts seems to me at least as pathetic an obsession, if far less harmless.

Which brings us back to the question of functional mental derangement, the percentage of psychopaths among us, the breakdown of the bicameral mind, the nature of consciousness, communication, perception and other brain-science topics. What always astounds me is the *contagious* aspect of such delusional systems, i.e. that functional paranoiacs and psychos often seem to have more than their share of charisma -- perhaps it is their absolute certainty and confidence that charm others? -- and hence tend to acquire acolytes, adherents, supplicants eager to be Admitted to the Secrets and taught to see the hidden meanings and writings in the street signage (or in Plato). Cult-formation around charismatic, manipulative personalities who claim to hold the crypto key to secret messages in well-known texts -- it

appears to be a universal human behaviour.

I sometimes wonder if it may be a response of the frustrated primate brain, adapted for pattern-recognition in a far richer and more communicative environment than that offered by the modern city-state; seeking the subtle spoor of prey or predator no longer in existence, trying to recognise the thousands of species of flora we have eliminated, trying to read smells on a wind saturated with hydrocarbons, desperately seeking more meaning than can be extracted from the dumbed-down noise of our days. And in the process, slipping a gear and starting to see complex constellations drawn between any four random stars, secret writing between the lines of every page, encrypted messages telling us exactly what our old reptile brain wants to hear...

Posted by: DeAnander | April 28, 2005 04:26 PM | #

yes fauxreal my comrade in new york sends me work being publishe in your country which astounds me - in the case of that harpers frightens me - paranthetically there is a demolition job of the new ee cummings biography that reflects a real hollowness in our age & in scholarship

i have read strauss & the whole gang or prettyboy psychopaths & their hollow utterances are not worth the study that some would imply. even heidegger the smartest of this cruel crew is not worth a single book by husserl. they are the thinkers that late capitalism deserves. minor thinkers. what is however necessary to study is the conditions - the concrete conditions

the concrete conditions where you have a fusion between a semi fascist lynch mob pretending they are all on personal terms with the lord himself, an intellectual class that is so impoverished it turns round & round the same points - that machiavel spoke to us clearly about, an intellectual class that has been coddled by richly funded 'think' tanks who want an extension & elaboration of that privilege, a political class that are as dumb as they come & can be herded by a fool like rove - who is a nothing of nothing really - whatever his experience with atwater - he is an old numbers cruncher - like any high level nazi functionary, a political class so mindless they don't miond being in the same movie that hjas been played out before, a judiciary that is close to its own moral collapse & a industry of communication that is so simply pornographic in its intent - i wonder why we take it seriouslly at all

those conditions, that fusion what some might loosely call this synthesis of elements is necessary to study until the end & as someone sd here that might come sooner than we think

Posted by: remembereringgiap | April 28, 2005 04:27 PM | #

This thread is awesome. Bottle it a time capsule so that whoever visits wasteland Earth in the future will understand what went wrong here.

Posted by: Cloned Poster | April 28, 2005 05:13 PM | #

Am presently reading Persecution and the art of writing by Strauss and can only say w/ weak confidence the esoteric meaning of great texts stressed by Strauss seems to point not to a kind of deconstruction or attack on myth/natural meaning/denotation, but a revelation of Truth for smart initaites.

But, I have to internalize this material before intelligently commenting.

The problem a number of folks have with Drury's reading of Strauss is that she's convinced that he's a postmodernist in the more or less standard meaning of that term. Like Strauss (in certain ways), Drury, whose liberalism is rather old-fashioned (not that there's necessarily anything wrong with that), believes that relativism is the great political evil of our times. She sees Strauss as a secret relativist. By her own account, she was attracted to Strauss early in her studies precisely because he appears to celebrate a strong, moral foundation for political philosophy. But she came to believe that this was, in fact, just a false front.

It should be noted that some Straussians (using that term broadly) more or less agree with Drury on Strauss's postmodernism (e.g. certainly Laurence Lampert who sees Strauss as a Nietzschean, and arguably Stanley Rosen). Most Straussians, however, disagree (or at least claim to do so). Drury herself admits that Harry Jaffa and the so-called West Coast Straussians don't share Strauss's purported relativism. Indeed, Jaffa (one of Strauss's earliest important students), Thomas West, and others of their ilk bitterly attacked Allan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind* as essentially nihilistic and un-American (with much gay bashing of Bloom along the way). Drury claims that Jaffa was simply never taught Strauss's secret teaching. But although Jaffa is, by Drury's own estimate, not a Straussian in the sense she (and Billmon) describe (though nearly everyone considers Jaffa a Straussian), he's very much an activist on the right (he's one of the leading lights of the Claremont Institute, and he authored Goldwater's famous "moderation in the defense of liberty" line from the 1964 GOP convention).

At any rate, the reason I point all this out is that Straussians while playing an important and subtle role in the American right are not the principal force behind the rise of post-war conservatism, nor even the principal force behind *neo*-conservatism. I'd say that the more grandly conspiratorial views of their role on the right -- *The Power of Nightmares* or Tim Robbins' play *Embedded* -- distract us from seeing their real role. And, like Lyndon LaRouche's attacks on Strauss, they actually provide convenient strawmen for people on the right to dismiss all criticisms of Straussianism.

This thread has done a good job of identifying some important affinities between Straussians and others on the right, but it's also worth remembering some tensions. One good example would be the statism of Straussians, which clashed pretty openly with the more Hayekian, libertarian strains on the right. This is covered well in George Nash's *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America* (Nash is a conservative, but he's also a very serious historian, and this is still the standard history of conservative intellectuals in America. It's a fine book and well worth reading.) In this regard, it's worth noting that Willmoore Kendall was the only prominent conservative of his generation to embrace Straussianism. Like the the Straussians, and unlike most conservatives, Kendall did not have a Classical Liberal bone in his body.

Plenty of people on the right are still very suspicious of Strauss and Straussianism (though mostly they're self-identified paleo-cons). See, for example, Claes Ryn's *America the Virtuous*.

The reason that many -- though by no means all -- Straussians were once Democrats is itself an interesting and complicated question. Bear in mind that the division between the parties has never been entirely about ideology, and that, until quite recently, there were more liberal Republicans as well as more conservative Democrats.

Another interesting figure to add to the mix when we think about Straussianism is Alexander Kojeve. This Russian-emigre French Hegelian was a key figure in the development of 20th-century French philosophy, and may actually have been a KGB agent. He was a (very respectful) philosophic opponent of Strauss. Their correspondence is included in the more recent editions of Strauss's *On Tyranny*. But despite their deep disagreements (Kojeve believed in the desireability and inevitability of a universal state; Strauss bitterly opposed the idea), Strauss sent a number of his students to Paris to study with Kojeve. And the ideas of one of the most politically influential Straussians -- Francis Fukuyama -- were at least as influenced by Kojeve as they were by Strauss.

I suppose the take home point for me is that American conservatism is a very complicated phenomenon, intellectually, socially, and politically. Straussianism, a part of this phenomenon, is similarly complicated. Exploring its various aspects is an interesting, and important, task for liberals and those on the left. But we should be careful not to reduce complex phenomena to single causes.

Posted by: BenA | April 28, 2005 06:09 PM | #

We should be careful not to reduce complex phenomena to single causes.

Nor should we hide from the phenomena that demand urgent attention by making fine graded distinctions that do not justify their claims on our attention.

For example, depending on which level of the philosophical game one chooses to play, "Straussianism" is itself a noun that represents something that does not exist. See, e.g. Thatcher on whether or not communities exist, her claim itself having a history. On the other hand, my country is in trouble as is the world. Strauss played his role and some people aren't prepared to see it.

Posted by: razor | April 28, 2005 06:25 PM | #

it is not as complicated as all that, bena - just a convergence of economic, ideological & political interests. the poverty of philsophy - of conservative philosophy has allowed for a small number of dominant voices - that too is not surprising

to be crude - these 'philosophers' & 'thinkers' have been bought & sold like any other form of chattel - even kojÃ¨ve or jean hyppolite the hegelian's hegelians - as you infer also came with a price

the brothers bloom & the whole enterprise of american conservatism masks is essence an infantile intellectual enterprise defending implicity the political/financial interstes of tyranny. sadly, for me that is all the american empire has always been a tyranny with an odd moment here or there of self illumination & correction which has never in any substantial way, endured

as always it is the left who provides the most beautiful songs & the richest & more multiple & less absolutist strains in philosophy

Posted by: remembereringgiap | April 28, 2005 06:28 PM | #

Strauss played his role and some people aren't prepared to see it.

I certainly wouldn't associate myself with those who say that he didn't, though I might

disagree with many over exactly what that role was.

Posted by: BenA | April 28, 2005 06:58 PM | #

I agree that conservatives should not be reduced to any one cause. In fact, the conservative coalition is actually composed of a number of ideological bases that are both complimentary and contradictory. Which is why I referenced Hayek in my previous comment. Hayek, a former conservative hero and a name not spoken much anymore, would be highly suspicious of the grand planning of the present neo-cons, the royalist tendencies of Bushco economics and the religious rights institutions of control. Although Hayekian conservatives are dying in number, either from old age a la Bill Safire or from outright intellectual fraud a la George Will, some remain. And those that are true at heart with their conservative libertine values should be uneasy and probably have been for a while. It is a fragile caucus that the conservatives hold, one part corporatist, one part royalist, one part religious orthodox and one part liberal in the classic sense. The question is when these groups will decide that their divisions are greater than their common interest.

Posted by: Bubb Rubb | April 28, 2005 07:14 PM | #

& the c i a does not have the budget it used to for these frauds

a reread of 'who paid the piper' might be in order

Posted by: remembereringgiap | April 28, 2005 07:17 PM | #

Speaking of the maximally irritating George Will, Werther (a byline I am always glad to read) is back at CP today with some commentary on Will's attempts to rewrite the history of the Viet Nam war.

> As pointed out in an earlier essay, George F. Will is a columnist who specializes in misleading historical analogies. Part of this syndrome is a penchant among pseudo-erudite pseudo-conservatives to invest present events with the urgent, cataclysmic patina of the Second World War: Saddam is Hitler, the occupation of Iraq is like the occupation of Germany, an attempt to negotiate a compromise is always Munich, and so forth.
>
> A variant on this syndrome is the sour, vindictive desire to ransack history and "make it come out right." The bookshelves groan with adverse comment on the far-Left's revisionist history. Much of this comment is deserved: this writer has yet to see persuasive evidence that Aristotle was a black African or that James Madison learned everything he knew about constitutions from the Iroquois Nation. As of yet, however, the revisionism of the pseudo-conservative wing of the American political spectrum has received surprisingly little attention.
>
> In truth, the self-described intellectual arm of pseudo-conservatism has for decades fairly seethed with revisionist emotion. If only Ike hadn't been a befuddled One-Worlder, we could have driven to Berlin and the cold war could have been avoided. If only we'd unleashed Chang Kai-shek, our boys would have been victorious in Korea. [2] No doubt some are still lamenting Pickett's failed strategy near a small Pennsylvania town.

[and more]

Posted by: DeAnander | April 28, 2005 07:29 PM | #

Billmons review of Shadia Drury is well done. But I agree that reading a book about someone's work is not the same as reading the author directly But Strauss is a tough nut to crack and we are several generations away from his direct influence. Things have changed. However I think I need to explore more of Strauss' gnosticizing tendencies again and review his long series of debates with Eric Voegelin sometime this summer. We are not all full time Political Scientists (and I am not. I am a historican!) and not all have the time to do that. I think Drury's book would make a good beginners guide. I may read it for fun on my next flight to the Midwest in June.

Posted by: diogenes | April 28, 2005 07:34 PM | #

"la loi, par contre, qui fait faceÃ la loi du coeur est sÃ©parÃ©e du coeur et libre pour soi. l'humanitÃ© qui relÃ¨ve d'elle ne vit pas dans l'unitÃ© bÃ©atifiante de la loi avec le coeur, mais ou bien dans la sÃ©paration cruelle et la souffrance, ou au moins dans la privation de jouissance de soi-mÃªme Ã l'occassion de l'observation de la loi, et dans le manque de conscience de l'excelllence propre Ã l'occasion de la transgression de cette mÃªme loi"

gwf hegel phÃ©nomÃ©nologie de l'esprit trad: jarczyk & labarriÃ¨re p 347

Posted by: remembereringgiap | April 28, 2005 07:42 PM | #

Though it's much harder to find as it's out of print, Drury's first book on Strauss, *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss* is better than the book Billmon has reviewed.

Posted by: BenA | April 28, 2005 07:52 PM | #

frankly, i think that's a lot of effort for minimal gain. my counsel is to read the old fella leo strauss by a breakwater in a black tutu while listening to ramstein on a battered cd player or even better for the mind the benjamin scholem correspondance coupled with a fast reread of old willy reich's the mass psychology of fascism & character analysis while listening to system of down

of course if pain's your thing - heidegger & eminem

Posted by: remembereringgiap | April 28, 2005 08:07 PM | #

Werther (a byline I am always glad to read)

I first came across Werther's stuff at Chuck Spinney's web site, Defense and the National Interest (www.d-n-i.net) He/she is definitely an interesting thinker, and his/her choice of pseudonyms is almost as intriguing.

Werther was originally the code name for a Soviet spy placed very high in Hitler's headquarters during the middle years of World War II. He/she is widely credited with leaking the exact time and place of Operation Citadel -- the German attack on the Kursk salient that became one of the decisive battles on the Eastern front. (It's still the largest tank battle in history.)

The identity of Werther has never been uncovered, although one historian wrote a book a few years back claiming it was none other than Martin Bormann.

Anyway, for someone who's billed as a "defense analyst in Northern Virginia" a pen name like Werther seems filled with significance.

Posted by: Billmon | April 28, 2005 08:10 PM | #

of course, with leo it would do well to read the worst, persecution and the art of writing & on tyranny - as for a cd by ramstein their entire oeuvre is disponible

Posted by: remembereringgiap | April 28, 2005 08:14 PM | #

I wondered if it was that Werther, or Werther as in "The Sorrows of Young". Apropos of which my neurological jukebox whirs and serves up:

> Charlotte, when she saw young Werther
> Borne before her on a shutter,
> Like a well-conducted person
> Went on cutting bread and butter...

Anyway, the mole Werther does seem more likely, and I agree it's a provocative *nom-de-plume*. Bormann? that seems a bit "out there"...

Posted by: DeAnander | April 28, 2005 08:28 PM | #

i thought it would have been goethe's werther too dea & there is also allussions to mr bormann in the histories of the red orchestra & of the big chef, trepper & not only because of the battle of kursk but because the information was daily & of such detail that it implied someone on the inner inner circle - is that gnostic enough but then i think t e lawrence was attaturk without a suntan

Posted by: remembereringgiap | April 28, 2005 08:42 PM | #

Amazing discussion. As neither a historian nor a philosopher, Straussians having the only key to the truth sounds like a mirror image of the pathology of their arch enemy, Lyndon LaRouche.

What the neo-conservatives give the GOP is the philosophical clap trap that supports the True Believers and Enron business leaders a high minded justification for their grasp of money and power. Lying and government propaganda is necessary with Freedom on the March.

Posted by: Jim S | April 28, 2005 08:42 PM | #

Ã´ jim s

lyndon larouche is as his name suggests an old showgirl & i think an old flame of bugsy siegel except she didn't know he was jewish & i think the only book she has read was something gordon liddy picked up in a paris antiquarian bookshop - les decombres by lucian rebatet & i think she has sent to america on a regular basis for its economic analysis & op eds, paris turf which she reads after omar sharifs finished with it

Posted by: remembereringgiap | April 28, 2005 08:47 PM | #

"Drury's first book on Strauss, The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss is better than the book Billmon has reviewed." I found the one copy left in the University of Maine system library

and snagged it for the next 4 months.

Posted by: diogenes | April 28, 2005 09:15 PM | #

Since we seem to be discussing ways of getting at Straussianism without reading Strauss.....

For those interested in a very different negative portrayal of Strauss from Drury's, it's worth checking out the chapter on Strauss in Stephen Holmes' *Anatomy of Illiberalism*.

John Gunnell, a very much non-Straussian political theorist who does a lot of work on the history of political theory in the US, puts Strauss in very interesting contexts in his general history of US political theory (*The Descent of Political Theory*), in his article on the 20th-century invention of the "great tradition" of political thought that Strauss and other European emigres like Arendt built their thought around, and in his article on Strauss's early career in Germany.

If you want to read Straussians (as opposed to Strauss), you could look at what they sometimes call the "purple bible," Strauss and Cropsey's *History of Political Philosophy* (a chronological series of essays on individual political philosophers by a variety of Straussians). The concluding, posthumous essay on Strauss himself is something of a *locus classicus* of post-Strauss Straussianism. This is, of course, very much in the realm of political philosophy. A good place to look for Straussians' views on American politics (not something Strauss himself much addressed), is a collection edited by Kenneth Deutsch and John A. Murley entitled *Leo Strauss, the Straussians, and the American Regime* (this book includes Gary Schmitt and Abram Shulsky's often mentioned essay "Leo Strauss and the World of Intelligence (By Which We Do Not Mean *Nous*)").

Posted by: BenA | April 28, 2005 10:01 PM | #

Ooops...the title of that Stephen Holmes book is *The Anatomy of Antiliberalism*.

Posted by: BenA | April 28, 2005 10:03 PM | #

Thanks BenA, very helpful

alabama, afaik now, *Persecution*... essays extol what Strauss over and over again refers to "esoteric" meanings of the "separate class" of philosophers who must write "between the lines" in order to avoid persecution and transmit meanings to future philosophers. To be sure, these "meanings" are certain, and for philosophers, not so easily equivocated. That is to say, great philosophers often proclaim othodoxy in order to "surreptitiously" conceal core heterodoxies. Thus: Kant is a frickin' antiprussian revolutionary, Hobbes and Hegel are atheists, Montesquieu a monarchist, and so on.

Well, no one knows for sure what is "between the lines." Didn't Charles Taylor find a transcendental turn in Hegel's *Phenomenology*? Who knows? Strauss doesn't intend proof of the real meaning, but only emphasizes reading between the lines can, when properly done, transmit true knowledge among elite philosophers. (the Kuzari essay I have not read).

Well, all this defense of the esoteric justifies secret knowledge intended to *protect* elites from the orthodox idiocies of the mob. Platonist elitism is preferred over a compulsorily educated ochlocracy.

Based on what I have read, Strauss defends the esoteric as a means to preserve elite power,

and not so much defense of any Truth. Put another way, he seems to me to be a "relativist" as explained above.

But I'm not certain.

This ia all I know after reading most of the book recommended by you, alabama.

Posted by: slothrop | April 28, 2005 10:12 PM | #

"People forget what separation of church and state is supposed to be all about," he said. "Freedom of religion is not freedom from religion."

Perhaps a bit old fashioned to assume words have meaning, but here's a good essay on ***freedom of*** *vs.* ***freedom from***

The Meaning of Freedom

Posted by: nathanw | April 28, 2005 10:14 PM | #

slothrop, we have the same edition of that book, and so I invite you--not to quote directly from Strauss in support of your claim that he presents a "defense of the esoteric" that "justifies secret knowledge intended to *protect* elites", or that he "defends the esoteric as a means to defend elite power"--no, not to quote directly from Strauss (which you may find a somewhat tiresome exercise), but merely to point me to the pages that you have in mind. The page-numbers alone will do just fine.

Posted by: alabama | April 28, 2005 10:42 PM | #

this issue of Harper's is *good*. barkeep! put another recommendation on my tab. should have the money next week.

Posted by: b real | April 28, 2005 11:10 PM | #

You're funnin' me alabama, but ok...

This is what Strauss *believes* to be preferrable to modern philosophy:

> [33]
> What attitude people adopt toward freedom of public discussion, depends decisively on what they think about popular education and its limits. Generally speaking, premodern philosophers were more timid in this respect than modern philosophers. After about the middle of the seventeenth century an everincreasing number of heterodox philosophers who had suffered from persecution published their books not only to communicate their thoughts but also because they desired to contribute to the abolition of persecution as such. They believed that suppression of free inquiry, and of publication of the results of free inquiry, was accidental, an outcome of the faulty construction of the body politic, and that the kingdom of general darkness could be replaced by the republic of universal light. They looked forward to a time when, as a result of the progress of popular education, practically complete freedom of speech would be [34] possible, or-to exaggerate for purposes of clarification-to a time

when no one would suffer any harm from hearing any truth." They concealed their views only far enough to protect themselves as well as possible from persecution; had they been more subtle than that, they would have defeated their purpose, which was to enlighten an ever-increasing number of. people who were . not potential philosophers. It is therefore comparatively easy to read between the lines of their books.15 The attitude of an earlier type of writers was fundamentally different. They believed that the gulf separating "the wise" and "the vulgar" was a basic fact of human nature which could not be influenced by any progress of popular education: philosophy, or science, was essentially a privilege of "the few." They were convinced that philosophy as such was suspect to, and hated by, the majority of men.'" Even if they had had nothing to fear from any particular political quarter, those who started from that assumption would have been driven to the conclusion that public communication of the philosophic or scientific truth was impossible or undesirable, not only for the time being but for all times. They must conceal their opinions from all but philosophers, either by limiting themselves to oral instruction of a carefully selected group [35] of pupils, or by writing about the most important subject by means of "brief indication. 1117

Writings are naturally accessible to all who can read. Therefore a philosopher who chose the second way could expound only such opinions as were suitable for the nonphilosophic majority: all of his writings would have to be, strictly speaking, exoteric. These opinions would not be in all respects consonant with truth. Being a philosopher, that is, hating "the lie in the soul" more than anything else, he would not deceive himself about the fact that such opinions are merely "likely tales," or "noble lies," or "probable opinions," and would leave it to his philosophic readers to disentangle the truth from its poetic or dialectic presentation. But he would defeat his purpose if he indicated clearly which of his statements expressed a noble lie, and which the still more noble truth. For philosophic readers he would do almost more than enough by drawing their attention to the fact that he did not object to telling lies which were noble, or tales which were merely similar to truth. From the point of view of the literary historian at least, there is no more noteworthy difference between the typical premodern philosopher (who is hard to distinguish from the premodern poet) and the typical modern philosopher than that of their attitudes toward "noble (or just) lies," "pious frauds," the "ductus obliquus"18 or "economy of the truth." Every decent modern reader is bound to be shocked by the mere suggestion that a great man might have deliberately deceived the large majority of his readers.18 And yet, as a liberal theologian once remarked, these imitators of the resourceful Odysseus were perhaps merely more sin [36]cere than we when they called "lying nobly" what we would call "considering one's social responsibilities."

An exoteric book contains then two teachings: a popular teaching of an edifying character, which is in the foreground; and a philosophic teaching concerning the most important subject, which is indicated only between the lines. This is not to deny that some great writers might have stated certain important truths quite openly by using as mouthpiece some disreputable character: they would thus show how much they disapproved of pronouncing

> the truths in question. There would then be good reason for our finding in the greatest literature of the past so many interesting devils, madmen, beggars, sophists, drunkards, epicureans and buffoons. Those to whom such books are truly addressed are, however, neither the unphilosophic majority nor the perfect philosopher as such, but the young men who might become philosophers: the potential philosophers are to be led step by step from the popular views which are indispensable for all practical and political purposes to the truth which is merely and purely theoretical, guided by certain obtrusively enigmatic features in the presentation of the popular teachingobscurity of the plan, contradictions, pseudonyms, inexact repetitions of earlier statements, strange expressions, etc. Such features do not disturb the slumber of those who cannot see the wood for the trees, but act as awakening stumbling blocks for those who can. All books of that kind owe their existence to the love of the mature philosopher for the puppies2Â° of his race, by whom he wants to be loved in turn: all exoteric books are "written speeches caused by love."
>
> Exoteric literature presupposes that there are basic truths which would not be pronounced in public by any decent man, because they would do harm to many people who, having been hurt, would naturally be inclined to hurt in turn him who pronounces the unpleasant truths. It presupposes, in other words, that freedom of inquiry, and of publication of all results of inquiry, is not guaranteed as a basic right. This literature is then essentially related to a society which is not liberal. Thus one may very well raise the question of what use it could be in a truly liberal society. The answer is simple. In Plato's Banquet, [37] Alcibiades-that outspoken son of outspoken Athens-compares Socrates and his speeches to certain sculptures which are very ugly from the outside, but within have most beautiful images of things divine. The works of the great writers of the past are very beautiful even from without. And yet their visible beauty is sheer ugliness, compared with the beauty of those hidden treasures which disclose themselves only after very long, never easy, but always pleasant work. This always difficult but always pleasant work is, I believe, what the philosophers had in mind when they recommended education. Education, they felt, is the only answer to the always pressing question, to the political question par excellence, of how to reconcile order which is not oppression with freedom which is not license.

Posted by: slothrop | April 28, 2005 11:22 PM | #

you might think the last bit about education is as defense of liberalism, but don't be fooled.

Posted by: slothrop | April 28, 2005 11:28 PM | #

3. None of this would be possible without a culture of political correctness. Much of the modern American "conservative" is pure, proven, bullshit, that, is protected by "liberal" bullshit. Take Scalia's "originalism" for example, which is a perfect illustration of Conteniental conservatism that has no legitimate place in American Constitutional law. He gets away with it. Its bullshit and he gets away with it. Tons of law journals and hundreds of well paid law professors, all dignifying "originalism" bullshit. If wichan is valid, so is originalism.

Posted by: razor | April 28, 2005 01:22 PM | #

[rant on]Bless you, razor. This is something that makes me go all Linda Blair-like from "The Exorcist" and starts my head spinning around and green gunk spewing out of my mouth.

I just don't understand for the life of me how otherwise intelligent people let Fat Tony get away with this bullshit.

How in the hell can any Constitutional scholar--or anyone that had a civics or American Government class in junior high school for that matter--give this "strict constructionist" horse manure the time of day? If the framers of the Constitution had meant for the Constitution to "evolve" with changing attitudes of the governed over time, then why the fuck did they provide a mechanism to amend the damned thing in Article V?

James Madison kicked Hamilton's butt on this very issue in *James Madison, Federalist, no. 43, 296* when he wrote:

> *That useful alterations will be suggested by experience, could not but be foreseen. It was requisite therefore that a mode for introducing them should be provided. The mode preferred by the Convention seems to be stamped with every mark of propriety. It guards equally against that extreme facility which would render the Constitution too mutable; and that extreme difficulty which might perpetuate its discovered faults.*

It infuriates me that a sorry-assed microbial physiologist such as myself sees through this "strict constructionist" tripe--and can find succinct refutations of this mindless drivel from idiots like Scalia and the religious whackjobs spouting his rhetoric in under five minutes--while highly paid talking heads with "research staffs" in the media let this blather pass unchallenged. [/rant off]

Sorry for the diversion from the thread topic and the profanity, but this crap makes me mad as hell.

Posted by: WyldPirate | April 28, 2005 11:57 PM | #

slothrop, if you elect to cite a passage, shouldn't you cite the passage *in toto*, or give some indication of the materials you've left out? In this instance, you've omitted eight dense footnotes, mostly referring to Plato, Cicero, Hobbes and Spinoza (and we know that, for Strauss, footnotes are the heart of his writings, just as citations are the heart of Benjamin's). Strauss, in these pages, is explaining the technical distinction between "esoteric" and "exoteric" expositions--a distinction crucial to Cicero's accounts of Plato's more "fabulous" passages. I, for one, have profited from Strauss's clarification of this particular detail, while you see only a power-play. Are you reading, perhaps, "between the lines," or simply refusing to read, or reading, perhaps, in haste? I don't reject the possibility that Strauss is being tendentious here,or that he makes too much of this one canonical distinction in the larger motion of his argument. But that's not the point you make, because you really don't care about the problems posed for readers of Plato by Cicero's ingenious approach. Strauss is indeed a remarkable scholar.

Posted by: alabama | April 29, 2005 12:25 AM | #

So sue me.

I might have to sue you for making me buy another book that's going to keep me up at night.

:-)

Seriously, brilliant post. You distilled down to the reasons for the conclusions I've come to the past couple of years.

Unlike some commenters, I'm not at all shocked at what there ultimate goals are- but I wasn't quite sure of how they got that way.

Though for the life of me I'm not sure what we can do about it.

Posted by: fourlegsgood | April 29, 2005 12:44 AM | #

I read Drury's book a few years ago. It was the moment of my awakening, in fact, the moment when I was born again as a political animal. Drury's arguments made seemingly nonsensical political developments look obvious. What the wingnuts politicians were doing was tiger-riding. Now they can't get off .

But I also recall how unsatisfactory Strauss's philosophy ultimately was for himself: it could buy no way out for the Jews, no way for them not be reviled and oppressed. His worldview was that of a chronic depressive.

Posted by: Echidne of the snakes | April 29, 2005 12:47 AM | #

wyldpirate

I assume you are being sarcastic, since Scalia disdains strict construction, and plays a different game, that won't work, called originalism. I say serious people read John Hart Ely.

My fault for straying from Straus.

Posted by: razor | April 29, 2005 01:33 AM | #

Way tired tonight. But I wanted to get this in...

> What gives Straussian thought its special flavor â€“ a bitter blend of hypocrisy and cynicism â€“ is the fact that Strauss himself didnâ€™t believe in the eternal â€œtruthsâ€• he championed. He was a nihilist, in other words â€“ but one who believed only the philosophical elite could be trusted to indulge in such a dangerous vice. In exchange for this privilege, the elite has a special obligation to uphold the â€œnoble liesâ€• the ignorant masses must live by if society is to survive.

Is this not, exactly, what the neocons and radical christians have long said about liberals? That despite all claims of ethics, the "liberal elite" does not believe the ethics it propounds? And was it not, exactly, true of Stalinism, too--for the masses, propaganda based on Marxism; for the elite, raw power. Motes and timbers, motes and timbers.

"Do not throw pearls [of wisdom] before swine, lest they trample them, and then come and trample you!" Which is from the Sermon on the Mount, liberally rendered, but seems very Straussian.

"In the history, the genuine history, of higher men, The stake fought for and the basis of the animal struggle to prevail is ever--even when the driver and driven are completely unconscious of the symbolic force of their doings, purposes and fortunes--the actualization of something that is essentially spiritual, the translation of an idea into a living historical form. This applies equally to the struggle of big style-tendencies in art, of philosophy, of political ideals and of economic forms. But the post-history is void of all this. All that remains is the struggle for mere power, for animal advantage per se."--Owsald Spengler. Cranky damn German. But he knew something.

Posted by: Randolph Fritz | April 29, 2005 02:41 AM | #

On the difference and consequences of "originalism" ("constitution in exile") vs. "constructionism" there was a good Jeffery Rosen piece in the NYT magazine some weeks ago.

The copyright loving freepers have a copy stored here.

Posted by: b | April 29, 2005 02:49 AM | #

Alan Moore once told an anecdote about a contemporary magician who decided to test the power of seeing the material world as acting in conformity with a set of preconceived ideas to the test by adopting a belief so strange that nobody could possibly mistake it for reality and then seeing what happened.

The belief he decided to go with was that Noddy, the little toy-car driving and belied-hat wearing protagonist of Enid Blyton's children's books ("Oui-Oui" in French, for Jerome's benefit), was in fact the absolute creator of the Universe and the God of all Gods.

Within a couple of weeks he abandoned the experiment in alarm, finding himself upon the brink of conclusively proving that Noddy was indeed an avatar of the Supreme Being.

He'd come across magazine articles showing freshly discovered cave-drawings of an obviously sacred figure wearing what appeared to be a tall pointed hat with a little bell on the top. He'd read an interview with Enid Blyton herself in which she described a strange vision that had come to her while under the influence of gas at the dentist; in which she had been whisked across the Universe at the speed of light to meet God himself, although he couldn't describe the details of their conversation. This, along with a whole mess of other stuff and previously hidden meanings in Bible passages (Cain is banished to the Land of Nod in Genesis, for example), seemed to indicate that Nod was God and Enid Blyton His prophetess.

I'm inherently suspicious of any philosophical system who tries to do what Marx, Strauss and others have done, and the Noddy anecdote illustrates why.

Posted by: Lupin | April 29, 2005 03:09 AM | #

Strauss's . . . worldview was that of a chronic depressive.

Well then I guess he and I have *something* in common after all.

Posted by: Billmon | April 29, 2005 03:24 AM | #

As they say, 'The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing'. Per my

norm, I share w/you, my snobbish mooners
CSPAN to Air David Griffin 9/11 Video on Saturday w/out hopes of comment as not many here even bother.

Posted by: Uncle $cam | April 29, 2005 04:28 AM | #

Billmon:
Whatâ€™s more, if the neocons did succeed in tearing up the liberal parchment regime, I seriously doubt they could control the forces theyâ€™ve helped unleash. The Bible fedayeen arenâ€™t exactly yearning for a little recycled Plato from the philosophical elite. Their version of the city on the hill might not have room for a philosophical elite â€“ not unless itâ€™s a fundamentalist Protestant one, which is a contradiction in terms.
.....
And in many ways, contradiction is the gasoline they're playing with -- within the tenderhouse culture of contradictions of red state Ulster/Scots tradition. Bush's ever increasing high stakes press conference shows roll the dice same as ever, blind arrogance in the face of humiliation -- up the bet, throw more money on the table, such is both the hallmark of vice and the" opium of the masses" -- or an illustration of solidary with the red state culture of contradiction. Its not lost on his handlers, that the audience here is in love not just with religion, but also with the pornographic trash pop culture that lurks everywhere else. Reverence for the uniform, a good fight, if anti- authoritorian is acceptable. But come anything that reaks of aristocracy, a privlidged elite setting the agenda, and all bets are off. I think the neo-con dip-shits have failed to take into account, as in Iraq, is even the most remote understanding of the culture they have such great plans for.

Posted by: anna missed | April 29, 2005 04:50 AM | #

> The strategy relies on Americaâ€™s puritanical longing for virtue

Before Billmon ran spellcheck over his post there was a t in front of virtue making it tvirtue. I wondered if might not be accidental. We do seem to get most of our virtue from television these days.

Thanks to all the heavy hitters for wonderful comments above. One wondered why the Straussians were once Democrats. Larry Flynt once said that if you scratch a liberal a fascist will bleed. I tend to agree though I still identify with liberals.

Last, feeling disgusted after discovering how the elites rule is probably what most of us experience after reading this. Do we feel this way because we are not in the elite group? Given the disdain that I have for many of my fellow Americans who support the current administration and what seems to me to be completely against their own interests, I probably would like to be part of the group that makes decisions for all too. Are we all whining about sour grapes?

Posted by: dan of steele | April 29, 2005 08:06 AM | #

Is this not, exactly, what the neocons and radical christians have long said about liberals? That despite all claims of ethics, the "liberal elite" does not believe the ethics it propounds? And was it not, exactly, true of Stalinism, too--for the masses, propaganda based on Marxism; for the elite, raw power. Motes and timbers, motes and timbers.

Citing a lie as a proof is a sorry ass type of argument. "Is this not what Nazis have long said

about Jews" and other applications of the same method spring to mind. "Liberal elite" is in itself a term containing such deep dishonesty as to poison all following conversation. The smug self-regard and gimcrack illuminatism for third rate academics shines so garishly from the polyester fabric of Strausses writings as to make appeals to the footnotes laughable. For what it's worth, Stalinism used appeals to Marxism to the intellectual elite, raw power for the governing elite and the cops, and patriotism and order for the masses. That recipe is merely a variant on the time honored method of governance that is advocated by Plato and practiced by Bush.

Posted by: | April 29, 2005 08:34 AM | #

Is this not, exactly, what the neocons and radical christians have long said about liberals? That despite all claims of ethics, the "liberal elite" does not believe the ethics it propounds? And was it not, exactly, true of Stalinism, too--for the masses, propaganda based on Marxism; for the elite, raw power. Motes and timbers, motes and timbers.

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Posted by: citizen k | April 29, 2005 08:34 AM | #

I can agree with the part about Spengler being a crank, but as far as knowing something...well, his work is more along the lines of Moore's revelation about Noddy.

(and the religious right would go ballistic if Noddy were widely available in the U.S. with his "paganism") off topic on a serious thread, but when I watched Noddy with my kids when living overseas, I always had to do a doubletake when Noddy talked about losing his rubber for school--those oversexed Brits...)

Thanks much for the interesting discussion on this thread, all.

It seems that, no matter how one approaches Strauss, the devotees who are now weilding power have developed their own "esoteric" meanings that all who have eyes can see...by their actions and their casual relationship with truth.

And as far as "any religion" goes, I think that Strauss makes it clear that the religion has to be one that holds "absolute truths" that, of course, are not absolute for the elite, but must be presented as such for the masses in order to have religion as a form of social control and justification for might making right when power is the ultimate end for the powerful.

Posted by: fauxreal | April 29, 2005 08:37 AM | #

I've taken a few moments to think things out. I actually got up at 3:00AM and pounded out my frustrations in an essay that I hope no other human will ever have to see. But as I have been thinking about this debate on Strauss, recalling a few grad school debates of a decade

ago, and historical theory in general, I decided to make a few brief cautionary statements.

2. Bush never read Strauss and Cheney probably never took the time to read Strauss Cliff Notes!

3. The notable neoconservatives that read Strauss in graduate school or had him as their advisor no doubt were influenced by him, but are not real Straussians. Often political theories are prisoners of their generation, especially when they never become the foundation of a real state. And even when their tenets are finally applied, these go through evolutionary changes over time that make the founding philosophy progressively more remote from the present. In America, many of the issues and movements that framed our Constitution no longer exist except in abstract form. Even historical revisionism becomes viable after so much time has passed. Most students in schools today have a very shady view of the Enlightenment. The focus of its rebellion is nebulous, its characters are not studied, and if my experience in teaching at three universities is valid, unless one is a history major or philosophy major, they have what I call the TLC Enlightenment experience: Textbook, Lecture, Candide. that's it, if they are lucky. Its our fault. In the great move to be politically correct in the 1980's and 90's we moved away from teaching Western Civilization course to teaching more inclusvie World Civilizations courses in the core. The average World Civilizations textbook omits much of Europe's history and tries to cover the Scientific Revolution, The Reformation, the Counter-Reformation, and the Enlightenment in one 20 page image-filled chapter, allowing for one lecture to cover all. And you wonder why a revisionist fundamentalist group like Wallbuilders can create and distribute a teaching system that advocates a Christian-only colonial America and a Constitution that really doesn't advocate a separation of church and state without a wimper?

4. I doubt that Strauss is being applied systematically in American government now. I do not think it is possible. But I do think that echo's of his philosophy can be see in the neoconservative movement. But they are working from a playbook, not a collection of weighty tomes. They don't work like that. They tend to avoid the study of the past. As one arrogant pup from Patrick Henry College now working in Washington once said, "We don't read history. We are making history!" And so I am wondering if we are chasing our tails going directly to Strauss and spending time and spilling ink over interpreting his language (which can be a bit of a brain twister) to see if the Neocons are really Straussian, Neo-Straussians, Straussian hybrids, or some other kind of creature. We must not forget that they are what they and want they imagine themselves to be. If we bury ourselves in Strauss trying to decode them, our conclusions get progressively more remote from any of the reality of the Average American and we even lose our ability to describe to them what is happening in any meaningful way. And we become a bright minority on a mountain top whining about concepts while the masses in the valley cannot distinguish our discourse from grunts and clicking noises they hear on Fox News! The sad thing is, this occurs when we are right, not wrong. What we need is their playbook, the distilled, dumbed down, Strauss stick figure that leads the Neoconservative movement. Otherwise our answers will lack relevance. And that what they have been saying about us all along!

I will still read Billmons Shadia Drury book and about 5 other books of Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin (including their corespondence)just for fun. I have summer to read. That's

what I do as an academic (even though this is outside my field) Millions do not. Millions are more interested in keeping their jobs one more day, seeing a doctor without health insurance, filing for bankruptcy before the new laws go into effect, and figuring how to earn another $1000.00 a month to pay for higher gasoline and fuel oil prices. Can we read Strauss' works...and find them an answer they can understand any better than we can now before the long process? Just a thought. I enjoyed Billmon's review very much and it does provoke my interest in the book. But how far should we go.....2006 is not that far away!

Posted by: diogenes | April 29, 2005 08:48 AM | #

Hmmmm. Point 1 disappered. Must be the gods.

Posted by: diogenes | April 29, 2005 08:49 AM | #

Whatever else he's doing, diogenes, Strauss struggles (and not always successfully so) for a measure of philological exactitude in Hebrew, Arabic, Greek, Latin, and the modern European tongues. He introduced me to Al Farabi, Maimonides, Xenophon, Marsilius, and Lucretius. And though he didn't introduce me to Plato, Aristotle, Thucydides, Hobbes, Locke, or Spinoza, he certainly showed me things in those writers that I would never have noticed otherwise. Yes, I think the book on Machiavelli is wildly, and even shockingly, perverse, but no more so, finally, than the writings on Machiavelli by most of Strauss's contemporaries. So why would anyone want to blow off a corpus of this magnitude? As for the so-called "Straussians," does there exist such a thing as an *interesting* or *informative* book by a "Straussian"? I'll pursue (most gratefully!) any leads you can provide (and it's obviousy not Schmitt or Kojeve I'm asking about). Finally, I doubt that anyone who has trouble tracking Strauss's dogmatic commitments could parse out much of anything. Strauss is utterly "exoteric".

Posted by: alabama | April 29, 2005 10:22 AM | #

Dear Alabama: If "philological exactitude" is something you value, what possible excuse can you have for using "liberal elite" in an argument? And, if I may, lists of philosophers one has read is less interesting than evidence of some insight.

Posted by: citizen k | April 29, 2005 11:17 AM | #

alabama

I don't reject the possibility that Strauss is being tendentious here,or that he makes too much of this one canonical distinction in the larger motion of his argument. But that's not the point you make, because you really don't care...

Bullshit. Really, complete bullshit. Yes or no, alabama, the passage confirms his own devotion to premodern philosophy as *strategy* to preserve recondite knowledge among "Those to whom such books are truly addressed." Note: this attitude is *essentially* antiliberal.

Posted by: slothrop | April 29, 2005 11:30 AM | #

Had I been a German-born political philosopher writing in English, and in 1952, citizen k, I might have supposed that the term "liberal elite" meant something to the readers of an essay being published in a learned English-language journal at that time. This is a guess, and I'd have to check it out to make sure. I do know that such attention to context is an elementary

philological precaution, and I offer this point, in all good faith, as evidence of some sort of "insight" on my part--supposing, perhaps naively, that you posted your question, and your point about "lists," in a kindred spirit of good faith.

Posted by: alabama | April 29, 2005 11:31 AM | #

Don't tell me how to read carefully, slothrop. I know the problems posed by Strauss, and I'm not going to pretend they aren't there. I offered you an opportunity to parse the opening sentence of this essay early in the thread, and you simply ignored it. I also pointed out the sloppiness, even the violence, of your own lengthy citation further along, and you ignored that point as well. I'm not inclined to try one more time.

Posted by: alabama | April 29, 2005 11:42 AM | #

I'm inherently suspicious of any philosophical system who tries to do what Marx, Strauss and others have done, and the Noddy anecdote illustrates why.

Marx analysis of capital is not mysticism, it's science.

Marx's Hegelianism (proletarians not bourgeoisie are world historical class) is not scientific.

Posted by: slothrop | April 29, 2005 11:47 AM | #

Interesting comments Alabama, but I think I am content to have read the classics in my time without Strauss as my guide. I cannot see him as Virgil leading me out of Hell.

Posted by: diogenes | April 29, 2005 12:11 PM | #

alabama

You have not defended, so far as I can tell, your claim I am wrong how I read this particular essay.

As for the opening P. OK. Strauss there merely acknowledges the suppression of speech. Notice: he does not declaim specific governmental suppression ("in the countries concerned"), but condemns generally thought following *logica equina*. The target of suppression he uses on 24-25 is the philosopher who, between the lines, "attacks" liberalism. I think it is quite obvious the essay includes "liberalism" as a kind of *logica equina*.

Now, important to understand is the condemnation of *logica equina* for Strauss is not some pomo assault of the evils of reification (sorry to use this big word, but I don't know what other word is an equal), but is an attack on the possibility of liberal education as Enlightenment. Probably the best clue about this attitude can be found in fn.14 and accompanying text.

I anticipate your reply, alabama: "But, Strauss is mining how and why esoteric writings come to be. As for Strauss, we cannot, by considering this single essay, prove Strauss himself chooses to emulate tyrranized scholars." As I say, there is enough in the essay to reveal an attitude Strauss has about liberal education. To be sure, the essay also confirms the external evidence Strauss did choose a deeply reactionary politics committed to the esoteric transmission of illiberal ideas.

One more thing: I suspect he is, at the end of the day, "relativist" because the secrecy is merely intended to preserve elite concentration of power. But, I'm not totally convinced w/out reading more.

Posted by: slothrop | April 29, 2005 12:22 PM | #

Wow, need to be more awake when I write. People seem to have missed my points about the neocons: that they blame liberals, falsely, for doing what the neocons are truly doing; and that these neocons also fail to recognize that they are duplication the posture of their hated Stalinist enemies--hence my remarks about motes and beams

Or perhaps, as old Trotskyites, they do recognize the similarity to Stalinism.

As for old Ozzie Spengler: the man predicted the religious right and post-modernism. I still think, however much of a crank he was--and he was--, he still knew something.

"If we bury ourselves in Strauss trying to decode them, our conclusions get progressively more remote from any of the reality of the Average American and we even lose our ability to describe to them what is happening in any meaningful way. And we become a bright minority on a mountain top whining about concepts while the masses in the valley cannot distinguish our discourse from grunts and clicking noises they hear on Fox News! The sad thing is, this occurs when we are right, not wrong. What we need is their playbook, the distilled, dumbed down, Strauss stick figure that leads the Neoconservative movement. Otherwise our answers will lack relevance. And that what they have been saying about us all along!"

But is this not, exactly, what Strauss said? Surely despair of the ability to make the rational case for good policy, and the need to instead make the case by persuading people regardless of reason is at the core of Straussianism.

Posted by: Randolph Fritz | April 29, 2005 12:55 PM | #

alabama

I'm calling you out from now on when you fail to justify your arrogance; like when you dismissed Dewey based on some uncited accusation he tried to destroy Charles Beard.

Stuff like that; like this thread.

Posted by: slothrop | April 29, 2005 01:12 PM | #

When have I ever tried to justify my arrogance, slothrop, and what would it accomplish? As for the point about Dewey, I can tell you truthfully that I came across it twenty years ago when working on a piece about the creation and growth of the Columbia Graduate School. I seem to recall that the conflict between Beard and Dewey was well discussed when it happened (in 1915 or 1916)--the basis, if memory serves, of Beard's departure from Columbia. It received some contemporary coverage in the New York Times. Better yet, the Times came out against Beard, which is not a point in its favor! And I don't dispute your thoughts about Strauss's essay (they may be right). Thank you for sharing them! That particular essay is not an easy read.

Posted by: alabama | April 29, 2005 01:52 PM | #

And diogenes, I read Strauss less as a "guide" than a "scout" who goes off and finds things, like griffins and unicorns. I think this is cool, even when the "science" is open to further refinement. The one book of his that I've really studied is his "Thoughts on Machiavelli," truly a bad book in interesting ways--less a guide, I should say, than a car wreck, warning us about the particular hazards of a particular road.

Posted by: alabama | April 29, 2005 01:54 PM | #

But is this not, exactly, what Strauss said? Surely despair of the ability to make the rational case for good policy, and the need to instead make the case by persuading people regardless of reason is at the core of Straussianism.

Randolph cuts to the chase, imho. We are now hearing more and more from the pwog/librul side of the house about the need to "frame" -- meaning imho to "spin" -- a debate rather than the need for education, critical thinking, empiricism, quantitative analysis. We keep hearing that we cannot appeal to reason, that "people" (meaning "the people," the proles, the plebs, the great unwashen) are deaf to their own self-interest, that they are (in essence) stupid, we are smart, and what we have to do is emulate Madison Avenue and figure out how to push their emotional buttons in the right ways to make them see, not "reason," but a warm fuzzy feeling about our point of view. In other words, to do advertising instead of public discourse.

The idea of democracy -- difficult enough even under conducive circumstances -- I suspect is on a collision course with corporate capitalism. My reasoning is that late capitalism relies on overstimulation of consumerism to maintain its fantasy of infinite growth; this overstimulation is achieved by a relentless barrage of advertising (aka propaganda); and the advertising works best if it encourages people to be stupid and irresponsible -- both mentally lazy and stupid, so as to suspend disbelief and self-preservation and actually believe the BS of the advertisers, and irresponsible so as to spend ourselves into debt. Corporate culture requires consumers to be dumb, trusting, selfish and solipsistic, with poor impulse control, a short planning threshold and deficiencies of critical thinking; functioning democracy requires people to be thoughtful, well-read, skeptical, analytical, responsible to self, family and community, and to take a long planning view. The two models, of the "ideal citizen" vs the "ideal consumer," are wholly incompatible. And the Ideal Consumer is also the Ideal Patsy for fascists, totalitarians, etc.

Consumer capitalism wants "the public" to be fantasy-oriented -- except for an elite group of CEOs, financial planners, bankers and PR agents whose job it is to direct our fantasies. Democracy would require us *all* to be reality-oriented, and to come to some kind of working fact-based consensus on how to deal with the realities of our collective life: peak oil, for example, or globalised trade, or environmental degradation.

Marketing departments and PR agencies are Straussians, or (to look at it the other way) Straussianism is the natural philosophy of spin doctors and PR flaks. A capitalism that is based not on manufacturing or on any sane level of resource extraction, but on fantasy (fantasies of infinite growth, fantasies of infinite resource, feverish resource looting, fantasies of infinite market expansion) is going to be owned and run by spin docs because it cannot bear too much reality -- "feral facts" will upset its workings. So contemporary corporate capitalism puts spin docs and PR flaks in the driver's seat. So it is not surprising that they reach for Strauss' hifalutin justification of their old carny game. He makes fooling

the suckers and ripping off the punters sound grand and dignified.

Posted by: DeAnander | April 29, 2005 02:04 PM | #

alabama

I welcome disabuse and not dismissal, that's all. I like to know why specifically I am wrong.

I'm more & more sensitive about this because rightwing assholes seldom prove anything, they dismiss. So, I expect more from my comrades here.

with all due respect, alabama.

Posted by: slothrop | April 29, 2005 02:06 PM | #

slothrop, I admit that I took your post of 11:30 AM as dismissive--but then it's hard to judge the tone of a post, as we all know.

Posted by: alabama | April 29, 2005 02:54 PM | #

Consumer capitalism wants "the public" to be fantasy-oriented...So contemporary corporate capitalism puts spin docs and PR flaks in the driver's seat. So it is not surprising that they reach for Strauss' hifalutin justification of their old carny game.

we don't even need to qualify it as "contemporary", though. stuart ewen has written several relevant books on consumerism and the history of the shaping of consumer consciousness in the u.s. & there one consistent thread throughout his work is the great effort of the pr machine to create a reality conducive to the interests of industry & capital. "The elevation of the goods and values of mass production to the realm of a *truth* was a primary task among those who sought to educate the masses to the logic of consumerism." this truth had nothing to do w/ reality as the typical worker or citizen experienced it. "For the most part, among the advertising and public relations elements of business, the success of consumerization depended on the ability to obsfuscate the work process, to create an understanding of the industrial world which avoided any problematic reference to production altogether." in a consumer society, goods magically appear on the shelves. pay no attention to the dynamics of wage slavery or the affects of industrialism on the environment. in fact, in order to transition the populace out of agrarian-oriented communities and into chaotic, exploitable urban cities, in effect separating the individual from an association w/ the natural world, it was seen as necessary for public relations experts to adapt & further exploit the efforts of taylorism and scientific mgmt to eliminate thinking from the act of doing. the history of spin is full of studies and attempts at controlling the public mind. bernays himself wrote "if we understand the mechanism and motives of the group mind, it is now possible to control and regiment the masses according to our will without their knowing it..." in his book *propaganda*, which was aimed at the captains and crew of industry. their idea of reality has always been hidden from the public b/c they know the majority would never settle for their own exploitation for the profit of a select segment. that this is also true for politics is no surprise, for business & politics have never been separated in this country.

but back to the topic at hand. given the increasing public awareness of the influence of deceptive tactics & corrupt philosophies routinely shaping our present and future survival,

what are we going to about it? at what point does one have enough information to do something w/ it? the opportunity cost of over analyzing seems pretty high.

Posted by: b real | April 29, 2005 03:09 PM | #

To the Straussians, it apparently doesnâ€™t matter what kind *of religious orthodoxy America has â€“ as long as it has one.*

The popular kind of religious orthodoxy in the US is Mammon worship. Better than pablum or soma...until the economy tanks. To what orthodoxy will Americans then submit?

Posted by: puffin | April 29, 2005 03:10 PM | #

Good post, DeAnander. BTW, (and OT), where do these lines you quoted come from?

Charlotte, when she saw young Werther
Borne before her on a shutter,
Like a well-conducted person
Went on cutting bread and butter...

Posted by: NickM | April 29, 2005 03:11 PM | #

B real asks - given the political realities that we face, what can we (meaning, I guess, proponents of classical liberalism and the Enlightenment) do about this situation?

Pardon me if my answer is unduly naive, but I need to retain hope that progress is still possible, if not inevitable.

Those in control want us to believe that we are atomized and alone; that the institutions of power are "natural" or are powerful because they have special access to the truth not available to everyone; that the present situation should be accepted because any attempt to change a heirarchical social structure is inimical to human nature and would lead to chaos.

We must recognize that these "truths" are fictions. All mechanisms of control are human constructs - none are foreordained - and people can change them if they want to. One person can do very little. Many people, working according to shared goals, can do a lot. We can vote for and give money to and join organizations trying to fight the anti-modernists. We can demonstrate our support for public institutions like libraries, public schools, public parks and Social Security. We can oppose censorship and limitations on the ability to communicate as freely as possible. As consumers, we can choose to spend our money wisely and vote with our dollars against corporate hegemony. We can think critically about the lies those in control want us to believe, and we can challenge the people in our lives - our families, friends, children, co-workers, etc. - to think critically about the world around them, and never to simply accept received wisdom. We can try to be generous, reasonable, compassionate, thoughtful, egalitarian, and tolerant. And to let people know that this package of good qualities comes from our acceptance, not of a "personal savior", but of responsibility for ourselves and for our affect on others. We can pledge our eternal hostility to every tyranny over the minds of men and women.

A more just and enlightened society is not inevitable, or even probable (here in the US, anyway), but it is always possible, and we must work and think actively to make that possibility manifest itself.

Posted by: | April 29, 2005 04:18 PM | #

Last post was me!

Posted by: NickM | April 29, 2005 04:19 PM | #

Well, I learnt something today: Oui-Oui = Noddy.

(No offense to all the other fine posts above; maybe a bit of levity could come in handy at this stage of the thread...).

France has tried an interesting version of the elite thingy so well described by deanander: the elite is *explicitly* there, and the rules to get in are clear, fair, and accessible to all: be amongst the top 0.1% of your age class at age 18 to 20 in maths and science, and you're in for the rest of your life, irrespective of your origins, and you're guaranteed the top jobs for the rest of your life. The money will be only decent, but the perks are great.

And guess what, despite a few mishaps, it has worked pretty well. anything that went wrong is due to the temptation of money, brought by the wicked anglo-saxons...

(Now you tell me how much of the above I really believe...)

Posted by: JÃ©rÃ´me | April 29, 2005 04:22 PM | #

@nick, I think the satirical verse I quote is from one of two anthologies published sometime in the 60's -- either *Verse and Worse* or *The Blasted Pine*. I don't recollect the author's name -- lost in the mists of time. the sectors of my brain-oxide that record doggerel have higher coercivity than the sectors that record names :-)

Posted by: DeAnander | April 29, 2005 04:38 PM | #

Diogenes:

As one arrogant pup from Patrick Henry College now working in Washington once said, "We don't read history. We are making history!"

> "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality -- judiciously, as you will -- we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.â€•

Unidentified White House official
Quoted by Ron Suskind in the New York Times Magazine
October 17, 2004

You'd think these idiots would get tired of imitating *The Triumph of the Will* all the time. But nobody ever claimed the conservative mind was original. Kind of defeats the whole purpose, in fact.

Diogenes:

If we bury ourselves in Strauss trying to decode them, our conclusions get progressively more remote from any of the reality of the Average American and we even lose our ability to describe to them what is happening in any meaningful way.

I agree with this, which is why in the end I'm not really interested in going beyond the "Cliff Notes" Leo Strauss. As I said in my post, what I'm really looking for are insights into what makes the neocons tick. I've been hearing about Leo Strauss for years, and decided to take a peek at this work, with Shadia Drury as my tour guide.

I don't know how much the neocons were influenced by Strauss's ideas, and how much they were simply enamored by their own ability to shoehorn his ideas into their will to power. But even an echo tells you something about the objects it bounces off.

Unfortunately, what Drury tells me is that the alliance between the neocons and the theocons is based on more than just political convenience. Maybe because many of the neocons were once Democrats, I had hoped (faintly) that they would eventually recoil from the obvious irrationality and superstition of the fundamentalist right. In other words, I thought the neocons shared, deep down, the intellectual assumptions of classic liberalism. I thought their big beef was with the *New* Left and the cultural revolution of the '60s.

Now I understand that they are the *real* "paleoconservatives," which means there's probably no limit on their support for an Americanized fascism -- particularly since the Jews have been granted the status of honorary Caucasians and turned into team mascots for the big Rapture Super Bowl.

DeAnander:

We are now hearing more and more from the pwog/librul side of the house about the need to "frame" -- meaning imho to "spin" -- a debate rather than the need for education, critical thinking, empiricism, quantitative analysis.

This is something I wanted to get into in my post, but I had to draw a line under it somewhere. The point is that the Straussians are taking advantage of the same contradiction in classic liberalism that every other totalitarian or authoritarian movement of the 20th century has tried to exploit: the fact that liberals set limits on their own discourse, and regard demogogic appeals to emotion (not to mention outright lying) as illegitimate tactics.

It's the same old story: tolerant people feel obliged to tolerate those who would ship them off to concentration camps in a New York minute if they had the chance.

Economists talk about a Gresham's Law -- "bad money drives out good" -- because rational utility maximizers will always hold on to the store of value they trust and try to pass the counterfeit stuff off on others. Which means that unless the counterfeiters are thrown in the slammer, money as a means of exchange soon disappears.

I think we face something comparable in U.S. politics these days, which is why I don't have an answer for b real:

given the increasing public awareness of the influence of deceptive tactics & corrupt philosophies routinely shaping our present and future survival, what are we going to about it? at what point does one have enough information to do something w/ it? the opportunity cost of over analyzing seems pretty high.

The only thing I know how to do is keep talking -- not out of any faith in the ultimate power of the truth, but because silence gives consent. And the day I consent to these bastards is the day they plant me in the ground.

Posted by: Billmon | April 29, 2005 04:41 PM | #

be amongst the top 0.1% of your age class at age 18 to 20 in maths and science, and you're in for the rest of your life, irrespective of your origins

cher jerome, imho that is modernised confucianism :-) a meritocracy, in a limited sense; that is, a meritocracy based on standards set by an academy of empirical studies. so long as the academy is not corrupted (as is increasingly the case in the US where corporate funding and influence is insinuating itself into one school after another, from kindergarten to postgraduate studies) -- and the testing is fair -- and there is universal education to prepare each generation for an equal shot at the testing -- it may be the "least worst" of all systems for selecting the personnel for planning and government.

of course one can raise objections... a single point of pass/fail selection testing ignores the question of "early peaking" individuals who are way above average at 18, but lose their fire and quality rapidly during their 20s; late bloomers, who are poor scholars in youth but develop considerable intellectual skill and finesse in later life; and other wrinkles of the sort that all standardised systems deal with poorly.

it also places enormous pressure on the youth facing that single pass/fail moment -- in Japan, university entrance exams are one of these moments and I have read that there is a great deal of unhappiness, sometimes suicide, around the terrifying one-shot event. imho second chances are in order :-)

OTOH it is better than selection by wealth and nepotism (US), by ballistic weaponry (Afghanistan and other vandalised states), heredity (Saudi Arabia and other surviving monarchies), or criminal ingenuity (applies in too many places to list including the US).

stringent literacy and maths testing would be a good start in a new qualifying process for political careers in the States. it would cut down on the number of politicians, that's for sure :-)

Posted by: DeAnander | April 29, 2005 04:51 PM | #

Marketing departments and PR agencies are Straussians, or (to look at it the other way) Straussianism is the natural philosophy of spin doctors and PR flaks.

Not at all. Marketing is profoundly democratic. You can work hard to find the psychological buttons that sell people whiskey without having the hubris to consider yourself among the elite who should decide what gets sold and without considering yourself above being sold other crap.

I would go so far as to say that marketing is revolutionary in that it is the attempt to rationalize non-rational persuasion. Since humans use the beauty of calculus to aim cannon balls and the wonders of medicine to prolong torture, one cannot task the discipline of marketing with being any more disgusting than anything else. If "liberals" refuse to use marketing to sell enlightenment, that is no more ethically compelling than a refusal to use machine guns on the SS.

Posted by: | April 29, 2005 05:22 PM | #

& it presumes an equality of opportunity to education wwhich is far from being achieved even in western 'democracies' - in the anglo saxon world, usa, britain & australia it is

actually getting worse

the equality of opportunity is a cruel & bitter joke

& it presumes someith about education that is clearly less true today than it was even 30 years ago & that is it is degraded as scholarship, it is coerced by econmic 'needs' & it is vulgarised endlessly by politcal appareils

i remember a very gifted economics professor in the 80's saying then " that the best don't even come here"

the fascist wet dream of the strauss's of this world & even of the hannah arendts is completely dependant on this absence of opportunity. after all what would we proletarians do with a 'good' education

people are right here to make a direct connection between a bill o'reilly & a leo strauss - they are born of the same poverty & of the same privilege

i pity them, they are no more than slaves

Posted by: remembereringgiap | April 29, 2005 05:25 PM | #

DeA - as officially part of that 0.1% (but not of the top 1% of that 0.1% - the 10 guys who will be the bosses of EDF, Total, Renault and AXA 30 years from now), I can tell you that the majority of my co-alumni are either kids of alumni or of teachers, i.e. the two groups that know the system the best. On the other hand, a really bright school, even in the worst banlieue, will be seen as such and pushed towards the right doors and he will get in - and one in, he is in, even if his name is Mohammed Ramdane or the like, or if his single mother is still cleaning windows back home.

The thing is - the State gets the best students, and uses them for the good of the community. (And they really are the best - and they really work for the common good). The tension comes when some of these people, feeling that they are working for the good of the community, start feeling that the rules applying to all should not really apply to them. The key is how effective the internal policing of the system is, and how much it is visible to outsiders....

Or am I trying to justify some form of rational straussianism?

Posted by: JŽr™me | April 29, 2005 05:37 PM | #

& what is so laughable with the american conservative philsophers of all stripes - & their haughty elitism - they have never ended sucking at the teat of foundations, of public monies & patronage by criminals

me i like my nihilism - completely around the twist like em cioran & maurice dantec who do us the favour of never hiding the fact they are despicable & almosy worthless individuals

just give me a little of ford foundation money & i'll provide you with 1 2 3 frankfurt schools

Posted by: remembereringgiap | April 29, 2005 06:17 PM | #

@DeAnander & Billmon
The point is that the Straussians are taking advantage of the same contradiction in classic liberalism that every other totalitarian or authoritarian movement of the 20th century has tried to exploit: the fact that liberals set limits on their own discourse, and regard demogogic appeals to emotion (not to mention outright lying) as illegitimate tactics.

It's the same old story: tolerant people feel obliged to tolerate those who would ship them off to concentration camps in a New York minute if they had the chance.

This is exactly the point that seems most promising for developing a more cohesive liberal dialog (one that also produces real alliances). I cited on the open thread Robert Parry's latest columns on liberal media projects because liberal media seems to be a kind of space in which liberal consensus could be achieved. With progressive radio in every town, it seems we could carrot/stick politicians to re-commit to political projects that aim to recreate honest consensus and commitment to social goods. Why couldn't liberal discourse make itself synonymous with hypocrisy-busting? Look at the history of abolition, suffrage, civil rights, and it seems that overthrowing hypocrisy is our one perennial strength - and it is mainly our own disorientation (admittedly abetted by a few assasinations) that keeps us from reclaiming this mantle.

The outright lying seems to be an essential part of the demagogic appeal, not just an extreme. Wouldn't it be possible to come up with a good set of standards based on which to ostracize those who proved themselves inveterate deceivers? It seems we should be able to be the people of discourse amd also be the people with the best BS detectors.

Posted by: citizen | April 29, 2005 07:05 PM | #

Someone above asked about the 'young Werther' quote. It's Goethe, is it not?

Posted by: Kate_Storm | April 29, 2005 07:13 PM | #

the doggerel is ABOUT goethe's hero, but the verse is by william makepeace thackeray

Posted by: mistah charley | April 29, 2005 07:30 PM | #

mistah charley

i would have never taken you for a fan of thackeray - these senses of ours are sublime

Posted by: remembereringgiap | April 29, 2005 07:59 PM | #

Thank you Mistah C -- it must then be V and W in which I read it, and here is the full text!

Posted by: DeAnander | April 29, 2005 08:00 PM | #

This post and thread are close to something key I canâ€™t articulate and have not seen articulated.

Today it is on my mind that:
1. The subject isnâ€™t Strauss. The subject is how Americans are being played for suckers by turning their civics over to lies and liars. Strauss is just an example. And I don't care how clever he is nor how dense his footnotes.

2.There is no coherent anti liar position. There easily could be a coherent anti liar position

based on the modern state of knowledge.

3.The big war is easily winnable. The opponents are weak. They are, liars working lies and power. Not like this is new human behavior that leaves us defenseless.

4. Common sacrifice is required. Intellectualâ€™s job is to develop a coherent anti liar position. But, will the trained professionals drop their favorite conceits, their favorite hobby horse, their favorite cant? Or, will academic provincialism prevail?

5. American is a sub set of the enlightenment. All anti enlightenment positions should be mercilessly attacked as anti American because they are.
The Declaration of Indepedence and the Constitution are enlightenment stipulations. Going tack into a European intellectual history discussion to justify the enlightenment is a disastrous move.

Posted by: | April 29, 2005 09:05 PM | #

You are of course right Anon. It will all play out, unfortunately.

The question is, will anyone see this utterly abysmal farce playing out at all levels for what it is?

I have hope, but not all that much.

Posted by: FlashHarry | April 29, 2005 09:22 PM | #

Anon -
Think you're right about academic provincialism ruining the discussion (muddied, muddied waters). Wondering if we need to start and nourish a co-operative movement/framework in higher education. Without such a move, higher education probably will not support a new generation of scholars writing to educate ordinary citizens to defend themselves.

Jerome - do you think LeSpeakeasy might be a place to start parking elements for a "blog lecture" series on economics? The field is the lair of many influential lies.

(P.S. - I'm already sure we need to co-op Kindergarten-3rd grade.)

Posted by: citizen | April 29, 2005 10:30 PM | #

By the way, I try not to use American dictionaries from after 1930s. The definitions get mushier and mushier - more about being correct and less about grounding incisive thought. Anyone else notice this?

Posted by: citizen | April 29, 2005 10:33 PM | #

citizen, you must be joking. The American Heritage 1967 (?) edition is work for the ages.

rgiap - you must be joking too. Absysmal as academia is today, 30 years ago Samuel Huntington was a stellar figure of the ivies, 50 years ago the loyalty oath were all the rage, 60 years ago Norbert Weiner was lamenting the cold war mentality of his colleagues, and 90 years ago "war is the health of the state" earned swift kick in the ass. And that's just in the USA. If we turn to Europe, it's even worse - Italian universities make one despair.

Posted by: citizen k | April 29, 2005 10:45 PM | #

citizen k, American Heritage?
I will look for that '67 (ish) dictionary.

Posted by: citizen | April 29, 2005 10:56 PM | #

It's the same old story: tolerant people feel obliged to tolerate those who would ship them off to concentration camps in a New York minute if they had the chance.

I'm completely mystified by this sentiment. I think it is essentially an immoral evasion of responsibility. The enlightenment is not a dinner party, comrade. It does not come from the sky, as a gift. Freedom is never granted willingly. The tree of liberty must be watered with the blood of tyrants. And don't let your mouth write checks that your ass can't cash. These all American proverbs are my moral guidelines. Frankly, I find tolerance over-rated. Extremism in the defence of liberty is no vice - although I've always wondered if Goldwater was making a Gallic pun.

Posted by: citizen k | April 29, 2005 11:23 PM | #

If a large (red state) segment of our population finds no trouble in living within giagantic cultural contradictions, many of which form an intrinsic aspect of their cultural identity and historic legacy -- it should come as no suprise that the lie, necessarily, should also be endemic. Because the first lie in this case is personal (&being to itself), it would follow that the interpersonal/political/social/etc. be expectant also of the lie as a reflection of national identity. Hence, we see a less than earth shattering outrage, over even the most blatant lying by the government. This (ad-hoc) logic would place the greater emphasis on not so much the lie itself, but on the effectivness of the lie in relation to what ever initiative it's in service to. So many are willing to shrug off even a really big (WMD) lie, because relatively speaking, admission or acquessence to such a lie would carry an equally large consequence of incompetence and worse, vulnerability and weakness. This all works really well for Bush because he is more than a caricature of the contradictory culture, he pretty much embodies it, and so goes with it, the implicit normalization of the lie.

Posted by: anna missed | April 30, 2005 01:19 AM | #

I agree that we're ingesting lies big and whole.

But think of your own or your friends' histories: don't people learn to stop when someone they admire or trust notices them eating lies, and meaningfully opens the subject of not having to swallow?

It seems to be personal first, and the bad politics grows out of the self betrayal. Which means we can do something effective.

Posted by: citizen | April 30, 2005 01:34 AM | #

I submit that it is faster and easier to create and promulgate a lie -- or a myth or an urban legend or sloppy research -- than it is to do the grunt work of uncovering it and documenting it. real research is time-consuming, expensive, and arduous compared to Just Making Stuff Up. as the pharmacorps well know.

therefore we're back to Gresham -- disinformation tends to displace real information,

because real information takes longer to create and disseminate, whereas disinformation is easy and relatively cheap. it can also be made more palatable to the consumer as it doesn't have to conform to reality. in other words, it is far easier to tell people what they want to hear -- they'll accept that quite quickly -- than to make a convincing argument for something they don't want to hear (that takes time, repetition, painstaking substantiation, etc)

if the lie machine spits out lies fast enough then the overworked "truth brigades" [yikes, that sounds Orwellian to the max] simply cannot keep up with the rate of lie-generation (because it takes more of them working longer hours to do so -- whole teams of people per lie, when it only takes one Rumsfeld or Rice or Bush to utter the lie in the first place!)... this is the secret of BushCo and of Mad Ave (not surprisingly) -- that novelty bullshit distracts the listener from the deficiencies and inconsistencies of the previous load of bullshit. people are still working diligently on the lies and scandals from Bush Year One, and now we are in Bush Year Five -- it'll take years before we can document what happened in Bush Year Four. they count on that.

even I, fairly literate and with an attention span greater than that of a sugared-up 12 year old, find the grisly details of complicated scams rather tedious to follow -- Kofsky's book on the airline industry's conspiracy to ratchet up the war scare of '48 is a case in point. it's a great book and meticulously researched; it's well written with a fairly sprightly, wry humour; and it's an essential book because this incident set the direction and tone of the mil/ind complex and its influence on national politics for many decades to come (we are still living with the consequences in a big and scary way). and yet it's tedious and arduous reading unless you have a taste for the kind of classic English detective novel with tens of suspects and a very complicated railway time table :-)

so it takes determination and grit on the part of the reading public to follow the complex stories of investigative journalism, the money trails, the Byzantine scams and the ever-changing cast of characters and the legal shenanigans and technicalities. *The Pentagon Papers* was a hefty tome, and the average American is conditioned by a deficient education and years of TV and movies to expect a simple plot with a small, identifiable cast and a satisfactory resolution in 90 minutes or less.

having said all that I don't know what eventually motivates societies to get sick of corruption and lies and experience a convulsion of reform. needless to say these convulsions of reform have not been without their own lies, hypocrisies etc., but on the whole the reign of FDR appeals to me more than the reign of McKinley. if I knew how to motivate large numbers of people to "Throw the Rascals Out" or get "Mad as Hell and Won't Take It Any More" -- even if they were a bit fuzzy on the fine details of BushCo's potentially impeachable offences (hell, I'm losing track of them myself at this point, there have been so many) -- I'd be out there motivating. any ideas?

Posted by: DeAnander | April 30, 2005 01:59 AM | #

It may be fast to make a lie, but its faster still to call a known liar on serial violations. We know these guys - and so does everyone we're trying to corral into a political coalition.

This is exactly what concerns me. Why should anyone feel any compulsion to keep investigating the *possibility* that a proven liar just might be lying again. I once spent a year working on a 6 person team to disprove a small corner of the eugenecist lies of William

Shockley. You're right - that takes time. And in the end, what a waste of time if we have to duplicate it for every Shockley epigone that slithers up to the microphone.

I am repeatedly shocked by credulous people who suggest that I somehow have the burden of proof to prove that someone like Shockley, or Herrnstein, or Lawrence Summers wasn't just probing interesting scientific possibilities when he mouths off about possible genetic inferiorities of blacks/women/whomever-they-hate in any field of mental accomplishment. Summers may be in a prestige position, but he also has a long term record of failing to support female scholars at Harvard (motive and means, enough, let him bear the burden of proof!).

What I am talking about is establishing some norms that it is the bearer of probably-false hypotheses that has the burden of proof, not the more intellectually honest person. Why couldn't we re-establish high standards of intellectual rigor? When an intellectual thug blathers on, we do not have to feel obliged to listen. Bush is a proven liar - president or no - and a healthy country would begin all discussions with such a president by demanding that he prove his statements before presuming that we owe him the least bit of attention in a press conference. The truth should be a standard over the president, not the president over the truth. Why NOT say this loud and angrily? We can use this mess to springboard our country to a higher standard of BS hating, so why not try?

As far as I know, a lot could be done in this direction with some determined sloganeering (Three strikes and you're out!, or some such phrase...) on our new liberal radio stations and blogs. If we would just - no, you're the liar with a track record here, you prove it! - then we could let the liars carry the load. Sports leagues use this approach - is there anything preventing us from appropriating the metaphors? Do we hate sports? I don't. What is actually stopping us?

Posted by: citizen | April 30, 2005 03:39 AM | #

citizen,

Nothing wrong with you're plan except the folks its intended to enlighten, don't much care for enlightenment. Once had an old highschool buddy who got a job on the railroad and just happened to occasionally dead-head to the town where I was going to college. He used to complain endlessly about how he hated those minority lazy shits who got to spend his hard earned tax money as a welfare check. Once I asked him, how many of these lazy minorities are in you're railroad union? His answer was, we can't have those lazy shits in our union, it would ruin it. Typical in one sense, but what I found interesting was the contradiction to him ment nothing, and my pressing the issue was seen as a personal attack. In a nutshell, this is typical of what the (fundy) right both hates about the (mythical) left (elite) and their reaction to it -- they don't want to hear about it, and they take it personally when they do. In some ways the're probably right in that objective analysis will surely illustrate an image of themselves most contrary to their own plight, and so reject it out of hand, even if it would be to their own benifit to learn from it. Its still someone else telling them who they are and what they should do, and here objectivity, even with a heavy burden of proof, is met as rhetorical elitism. Which as it should, drives them deeper into the tit of religion and cultural identity where faith and the honor code pay tribute to their personalized oppression, in exchange for political obedience -- in effect choosing power over truth. It's an inverted catch-22, they can't embrace factual truth because it would compromise their faith in truth, so they embrace faith to ward off the facts.

Posted by: anna missed | April 30, 2005 06:20 AM | #

Before it can be concluded lies beat truth, or, more accurately, whether there are some truths that can be used to beat the lies being told by people who have or are close to power now, the experiment must be run, the competition held. Who has used truth to beat the current crop of lifes?

Or, restated, why does the Daily Show get laughs? And, why is the Daily Show so unique?

The test hasn't been run.

Posted by: razor | April 30, 2005 10:49 AM | #

Strauss wrote to LÃ¶with in May 1933, five months after Hitler's appointment as Chancellor and a month after implementation of the first anti-Jewish legislation, that "Just because Germany has turned to the right and has expelled us," meaning Jews, "it simply does not follow that the principles of the right are therefore to be rejected. To the contrary, only on the basis of principles of the right--fascist, authoritarian, imperial [emphasis in original]--is it possible in a dignified manner, without the ridiculous and pitiful appeal to `the inalienable rights of man' to protest against the mean nonentity," the mean nonentity being the Nazi party. In other words, he is attacking the Nazis from the right in this letter. He wrote that he had been reading Caesar's Commentaries, and valued Virgil's judgment that, "under imperial rule the subjected are spared and the proud are subdued." And he concluded, "there is no reason to crawl to the cross, even to the cross of liberalism, as long as anywhere in the world the spark glimmers of Roman thinking. And moreover, better than any cross is the ghetto."

http://www.logosjournal.com/xenos.htm

Posted by: dk | April 30, 2005 11:04 AM | #

I think it's much a matter of style. That's why the cult of toleration is so objectionable. Being a racist superstitious ignoramus is evil and toleration of such evil, respect for it even, is complicity. Religious nuts of my acquaintance are startled when I tell them I think e.g. "creation science" is a nice myth for people who want their children to be beggars, or that their views on abortion make them morally responsible for scared 13 year old girls killing themselves or being too afraid to report abuse. They correctly perceive "respect" from liberals as weakness and confusion.

Posted by: citizen k | April 30, 2005 11:10 AM | #

Tolerance of the flase is the problem. Put another way, all insiders give up their credibility to be an insider. Disagreeing doesn't gain anything. Disagreement by a credible person who is not an insider can be devastating. The trumpeted interview with the U of Minn doctor where the doctor pointed out the clown interviewing him was a fool and the doctor they were citing was a quack floored the interviewer. The doctor was credible, not an insider, not playing patty cake with jack asses. Now, turn to the classic Democrat operative and ask whether they are like this doctor..... No, the truth has not been used in this era of American politics by either side.

Posted by: razor | April 30, 2005 11:36 AM | #

Razor - that's certainly part of the story, but it's more widespread.

Posted by: citizen k | April 30, 2005 12:00 PM | #

Ah, here's the comment thread! Thanks to Enchidne for the link; I was pow'ful dry.
The Heine quote is exquisite: could you cite, please?

Two points (they may have been made: too many comments!)
The Straussian neocons demonstrate historical irony most forcefully when they claim that the liberal state lacks adequate moral grounding to defend itself against tyranny and, though lacking any dependence on moral values, ally themselves to fascist zealots to create the tyranny that may destroy the liberal state in the name of traditional moral values.

Ordinary people ("everyman/woman")are more likely to claim religious values than "liberal" values as a motive to action. This needn't be alarming; American history is full of justice movements led by, among others, religiously committed people: abolition, women's rights, anti-imperialism, workers. Perhaps the crisis of the liberal state (to borrow a historical phrase) might be addressed by coalitions which affirm religious values/ commitment.
Now to Amazon for the Drury. Great post: thanks!

Posted by: jb tamp | April 30, 2005 01:39 PM | #

Apologies if someone has posted something to this effect already, but I'd think twice before taking seriously anything from the keyboard of John Kaminski. I've spent some time at his website, and he really comes off as an anti-Semitic LaRouchie freakazoid. Get an eyeful of this charming little essay.

Posted by: Loveandlight | April 30, 2005 04:24 PM | #

dk

Thanks for the cite to the 2004 spring logos. That quote is stunning. Strauss was a nut and many of the insane things I have been reading for years - like that Athens Jerualeum non sense, and only the Western cannon matters, death to multi culturalism - follow naturally from Hannibal Lectern Strauss himself.

Reading that follow up convinces me more than ever that the problem is more the incompetence of the opposition than the clever lies of the Straussians, whatever-ians.

Posted by: razor | April 30, 2005 04:36 PM | #

"What hath Athens to do with Jerusalem?" That's Tertullian using a Athenian rhetorical device to put down Athenian learning!

Posted by: diogenes | May 1, 2005 12:24 AM | #

The Heine quote is exquisite: could you cite, please?

I first came across it when I was in college and writing a paper on the historical antecedents of facism in German society. It was quoted in ome of my texts. But I can't remember where the quote itself appears in Heine's work. I've long since tossed the paper, and I didn't think I would be able to find it again. But Google is an amazing thing and I came across it in the middle of a long incoherent article about the Nazis. But with no citation.

dk:

Strauss wrote to LÃ¶with in May 1933, five months after Hitler's appointment as Chancellor and a month after implementation of the first anti-Jewish legislation, that "Just because Germany has turned to the right and has expelled us," meaning Jews, "it simply does not follow that the principles of the right are therefore to be rejected.

This reminds me of the scene in Dr. Strangelove where the president is reaming out the general played by George C. Scott for giving a madman the authority to launch a nuclear attack.

President: Clearly, the system has failed?

General: Sir I don't think it's fair to jump to conclusions before all the facts are in.

Posted by: Billmon | May 1, 2005 12:33 AM | #

dk, you touch on an utterly disabling feature of Strauss's work, namely this: on the subject of Christianity--or more precisely, on the writings of Paul, Augustine, and Luther--Strauss doesn't speak his mind. He doesn't give us his thoughts, and perhaps he doesn't have any thoughts to give. On the rare occasions when he mentions someone else's Christianity--as in the pieces on Marsilius, Machiavelli or Hobbes--he writes as if it were a distraction, something not to spend time on. He actually infantilizes Christianity, and approaches the Greek, Latin and Hebrew authors as if one could read them right off--as if they weren't massively mediated by the Pauline epistles. This may be a mere nostalgia on Strauss's part--nostalgia, perhaps, for year 10 BC?--but it nonetheless robs his project of any real pertinence (a point overlooked, I suspect, by his adoring multitudes) He's an excellent writer all the same--especially on the attack--and his erudition is always delightful.

Posted by: alabama | May 1, 2005 01:26 AM | #

From citizenk (with a quote by Billmon)

It's the same old story: tolerant people feel obliged to tolerate those who would ship them off to concentration camps in a New York minute if they had the chance.

I'm completely mystified by this sentiment. I think it is essentially an immoral evasion of responsibility. The enlightenment is not a dinner party, comrade. It does not come from the sky, as a gift. Freedom is never granted willingly. The tree of liberty must be watered with the blood of tyrants. And don't let your mouth write checks that your ass can't cash.
..and..
I think it's much a matter of style. That's why the cult of toleration is so objectionable. Being a racist superstitious ignoramus is evil and toleration of such evil, respect for it even, is complicity

--I think the problem is that people who believe in tolerance are taken by surprise by those whose worldview is entirely built upon intolerance. Extremist religious fundamentalists of any version fit into this category, as do totalitarian leaders of either left or right.

It is the foreigness of these attitudes that makes it hard to develop an initial defense against them. It is the belief in "let us reason together" that keeps liberals from responding in kind initially.

Toleration of objectional opinion is part of free speech. It may not be pleasant, but you can be on the other end of that objection to some people.

When the views, racist or dominionist or fascist, whatever they are, move from speech to actions, then, yes, they must be opposed. Challenged. Physically confronted, first through non-physical legal means, and, if need be, by self-defense.

I'm encouraged to see people like Wallis speaking out about another view of Christianity. Also the nun who spoke about the religious right being pro-birth, not pro-life, because they don't give a damn about those children's well being once they are born. Hyprocrisy is the achilles heel of the religious right.

But I'm also concerned about the influence of the religious right in the military. I wonder if large parts of the military would defend the constitution or the dominionists.

Obviously the guy at the AF Academy in Colorado Springs who was called a "filthy jew" would not go along with a "Christian" army...but how many people like him are there?

And the military gets fed a daily diet of Rush Limbaugh vomitus. Do they also get Air America? do they get The Daily Show?

These are the machinations that worry me. Military indoctrination. This is where Strauss's objections from the right can find expression in current American life.

Since 2000 I have seen the unthinkable happen, then happen again. I have grave questions about the level of complicity or neglect among a select few vis a vis
9-11.

People talk openly about another attack, engineered by insiders, not outsiders, to make a draft possible.

At the same time, the majority of Americans don't seem to care what is happening to the Iraqis, and want to believe what they are told in order to avoid responsibility for their compliant and passive acceptance of the abuse of power that signifies this administration.

So, yes, it is important to find a local group that you can be a part of to work in opposition. Peace and Justice. The Quakers. Interfaith Alliance. Local dems if they're not co-opted. Local greens if they have any real influence. Environmental groups that lobby at the state level...because these fights have to be won at the state and local level considering the current federal flaccid response.

It's important to step away from the computer and act rather than just talk.

Posted by: fauxreal | May 1, 2005 10:11 AM | #

There is toleration and toleration. To pretend that Limbaugh is just a citizen expressing his views in a forum open to all, is simply naive. Surely free speech rights do not carry immunity from drug laws or a right to have your loathsome opinions monoplize the public airwaves. "Liberals" who look at the domination of media by extremist wingnut propagandists and see "free speech" are complicit in the destruction of the republic.

Posted by: citizen k | May 1, 2005 10:30 AM | #

The domination of the media by extremist wingnut propaganda is a result of the repeal of

the fairness doctrine under Reagan.

what do you suggest that people should do, citizen k? how would you stop people like Limbaugh?

I, for one, am not pretending Limbaugh is just another citizen, but tell me what the answer is to his presence on the air?

Liberals do need their own voice and their own attacks on the right wing. And funny, as this has happened more and more, the right wing suddenly accuses the left of "the politics of hate," as though we invented it.

The left needs a South Park that talks about the bullshit from the religious right, the political right, corporations, and the complicity of other politicians who let such power structures stand without calling them out...asking what the ultimate goal is for people like Robertson...quote Ralph Reed back to him about the need to hide their goals...but it's okay if it's in the service of the Lord.

the coalition between liberals and libertarians is where the fight back may lie. Stupid drug laws that both parties have brought about. Stupid "personhood" for corporations.

But, in light of the last sentence of your comment, tell me. what solutions do you have?

Rather than accuse people, what do you do to stop the current situation?

My solution is calling them on the bullshit. My solution is talking to people who dont' spend time reading about all the crap and pointing out the crap. My solution is to compare what's going on here with what has gone on in the past, and note the simliarities to fascism and theocracy. I've marched in Washington, and little good it did. I've contacted my reps, written to Bush, attended town hall meetings with reps and city councils to pass anti-patriot act manifestos, for what little good that would do. I volunteer for an organization that presents alternative news and views.

So please tell me what the solution is to the current situation.

Posted by: fauxreal | May 1, 2005 12:29 PM | #

So please tell me what the solution is to the current situation.

We need a billionaire media owner/class traitor who will comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.

Posted by: slothrop | May 1, 2005 12:53 PM | #

The fairness doctrine wasn't really killed by reagan/fowler. Fed courts have merely ruled the FCC may choose not to enforce the doctrine. Basically, *Red Lion*, the famous late '60s SC case upholding fairness doctrine in broadcasting, is good law.

Posted by: slothrop | May 1, 2005 01:25 PM | #

for me, rush limbaugh & leo strauss are different faces of the same machine. they are deeply & resolutely antidemocratique. their misanthropy is not an eccentricity but a fundamental flaw. their hatred of the people as formations, things or as ideas is repellant. & that nihilism is the most easiest of talents to be borne with & to elaborate

love on the other hand is extremely difficult - practically & ideologically. i'll take from nugget's use of brecht - an example - here was a man who was misanthropic - almost congenitally so & he fought it first as an atrist & then as a man; there is so much love - especially in the later works even though it is hidden under the 'certainties' of marxist science. i do not doubt two things whatever mr fuegi says(& his is a classic disciples rejection) - one, he understood that capitalism, in all its forms - whether it was fascism, capital accumulation hidden behind the farce of legislative politics, or of state 'communism' - that he experienced in the last years of his life - he understood that this form destroys people & it is not an accident of the system but its intention.

secondly, he transformed an affinity through compassion & talent into a weapon - both to understand the nature of art & also of the world. the desire for a real & substantial justice at the deepest levels informs everything from his diaries, work journals, poems & plays.

he turned himself inside out & became another man

yes, he was flawed but he worked against that flaw & at the very least interrogated it with power & imagination

on the other hand, the strausses of this word - make from their flaws - their lives

i can understand someone saying - well they are just commentaries on classic texts & in that sense they thow a light & are useful for that illumination. but these commentaries are not neutral nor are they innocent. the law, the polity & the 'ethics' of tyrants are written from men(for the most part)like these & they serve to create acts that are criminal, deeply criminal

& what is most apparent in these elegantly formed texts is their bitterness; a bitterness they have no right to. their bitterness was funded extremely well by both capital & its legislative arm; their sick lives were built onthe monies meant for a real education, for real scholarship - for a substantial examination of the lived world. they were never up to that task & a century from now they will be completely forgotten as the second & third rate vulgarisers that they actually are

so in that sense i do not feel any fundamental difference between the more clearly brutal & vulgar articulations of a limbaugh, an ismus, an o'reilly & the practical vulgarity of thought & brutality of influence of a leo strauss

in that sense - alabama - is quite correct - read the man himself - he provides ample proof of his vulgarity & his brutality

Posted by: remembereringgiap | May 1, 2005 01:51 PM | #

Bill Mon - I just finished reading this. I must say that I find your writing to be the best writing I have come across in the blogosphere. This piece on Strauss and the Neocons was fascinating, and explained well a complex situation. It has spawned multiple ideas, of which I canâ€™t help but feel compelled to write at length about.

What I find troubling is the importation into American politics, 19th Century German philosophical tradition, almost all of it marinated in nihilism, and the infusion of this philosophical tradition into our tradition of politics. The German system of politics is ideology based and such politics destroyed Germany and much of Europe. Indeed philosophy is dangerous, because it tries to simplify the human experience into one simple

unifying thought, statement or philosophic trajectory. Real life is more complicated than that.

The Anglo world avoided this German tendency by being heavily reliant upon "Realism" as in "Legal Realism" - As Oliver Wendell Holmes articulated, in the face of German legal theorist and their drenching philosophy *"the life of the law is based upon experience"* or in other words pragmatism.

What is often overlooked is that the legal framework is to much of society, culture and politics, what Churchill said of architecture: "We shape it and it in turn shapes us." The notion of Liberty evolved out of English Common Law jurisprudence, and at some point, made the jump to Politics and Economics.

In the Anglo tradition, the philosophers trail behind the events, articulating what has happened, not articulating in advance but retrospectively. Locke articulated not a new idea for government, just what English constitutional government had evolved into after Englandâ€™s Glorious Revolution - which itself was new or more advanced than anywhere else. Same with Adam Smith - Smith describes capitalism, but he is describing that which is already occurring and at work, (in my view) he did not invent it. That these Anglo philosopherâ€™s were so accurate is that they were using hindsight to describe something in their present, not projecting some nonexistent theoretical into the future (as in the case of Marx - my view anyway).

The point is: By way of pragmatism Common Law - by way of pragmatic judicial decision - decides on a case by case basis what philosophic perspective prevails in a given instance for a given set of specific circumstances. In such a way evolves a sophisticated patchwork of philosophical islands where they rightly belong, and not where they don't belong. (In the German tradition however, a general philosophy prevails universally â€“ both where it does and doesn't belong â€“ creating a weaker aggregate reality). In the Anglo-American system you have, philosophically, a little bit of this, a little bit of that, where they are optimized, which combined creates a modern, highly sophisticated society that is both liberal and traditional where appropriate.

This all maps to Holmes liberalesque view that each idea has to compete for itself in the market place of ideas - a sort of free market Darwinianism for ideas: but all done on a case by case basis. This protects society from ideological heavy-handedness and with it, nihilism.

Politics lumbers along behind the legal culture in a similar manner. But the importation of Straussianism into our political culture brings with it anti-pragmatic/anti-'realism' dogmatism into the American political and legal culture. And we see these Straussians assaulting, with great vigor, the legal culture, which is the underpinning of the political culture. A broad ideology can't prevail politically in America unless you eliminate the common law system and its system of pragmatism. And please note that one man's hypocrisy is another's pragmatism.

Unfortunately, politics does not evolve as quickly as the legal culture, but perhaps it is because our political system is fairly new - less than 250 years old. For instance: The law, long ago, compensated for disparities in bargaining power so that litigation occurs on a fairly level playing field to better insure a just out come - our politics is struggling under a crisis of fairness in a playing field distorted in favor of the wealthy.

The essence of the current struggle involves how our system responds to the distortions created by the invention of the limited liability corporation in the 1860s.

America was conceived in liberty and the principle of freedom, especially the principle of free contract. In 1776, most free people earned their living through contractual relations between individuals, each bargaining on fairly even playing field: individual to individual - with the caveat that if an equitable deal couldn't be arrived at, the frontier beckoned.

In 1776 freedom was fairness. After 1862, and the invention of the modern limited liability corporation these principles proved less congruent. The contractual playing field was no longer level. Individuals increasingly bargained with powerful collectives, the corporations, for their earnings. The situation was made worse by the closeing of the American frontier sometime in the 1880s. This spawned the gilded age with its unheard-of concentrations of both wealth and diffusion of squalor in America and throughout the liberal world, which before World War I, was spreading everywhere.

The strains of World War I, on top of the strains of societies already unfairly balanced, triggered the collapse of liberal systems in many countries following the great war. Reactionary systems emerged on the left (communism) and right (fascism) and threatened the existence of liberalism for the rest of the 20th century. Liberalism prevailed against these challenges, but only after it began to address its problems with unfairness (through collective bargaining).

The solution was to somehow restore fairness: The political processâ€™ response to the invention of the corporation, an investment collective, was collective bargaining for workers specifically and â€˜The New Deal in general.â€™ The wisdom of this response was a post World War II economic boom which doubled global productivity in less than 30 years.

Who could argue with this kind of success? Well a few elites, who liked the way the Gilded Age had sent them to the top of the pyramid â€“ that is who. Prior to the Gilded Age, nothing like the Gilded Ageâ€™s social distortion existed in America. But, once you create an elite, the next thing they want is to become a permanent elite, or an aristocracy (and an end to the aristocracy tax also known as estate tax).

(This creates a curious situation - the Gilded Age distorted American Society, creating an Aristocracy unheard of in America, this Aristocracy of course embodies a culture that is alien to America, this culture does not map to the political institutions that stress equality - thus you have a tension created between the political institutions and a subset of American culture, one alien to it because of its inherent inequality - In this way the elites become the revolutionaries trying to tear down existing democratic institutions to impose new institutional arrangements. As suggested below, this is not possible without altering the culture, which means ultimately is best accomplished by altering the legal culture. Thus we have a massive revolution driven by a discontented elite.)

The New Deal solution was brilliant, but not perfect. And reaction by the wannabe elites was bond to follow suit, if it could gain traction. Today we know it did gain traction. But how? Three events I think, gave them traction.

First: The Vietnam War - Because of McCarthy (in my view) no Democratic president wanted to be seen as weak on communism or losing Vietnam as Truman had lost China. Johnson thus was compelled, to the extent of fabricating a pretext(Gulf of Tonkin) to invest

heavily in Vietnam. American liberals pealed away from the Democratic party in the late 1960s.

Second: Assasination â€“ Liberal leaders disappeared: John Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King and often over looked, the plane crash that killed Walter Reuther.

Third: The Japanese Company Union The Japanese had constructed a different economic/social model in regard to collective bargaining: Company Unions. Whereas we had trade unions. Our mix caused industrial sclerosis, tended to thwart competitiveness by causing consolidation in industries and entrepreneurialism by way of pattern bargaining. The Japanese system allowed for more entrepreneurialism and was resilient to consolidation: thus in an underdeveloped market Japan sent eight entrepreneurial automobile companies to compete against our four oversized sloth like behemoths in an over developed market.

When the Japanese system collided with the American system beginning in the 1960s, The Japanese model triumphed over our model.

Entrenched interest prevented the U.S. from adopting Japanese style company unions (and today Japan has the broadest distribution of wealth in the first world among major economies) â€“ but one wonders if perhaps had Walter Reuther not died in the early 1970s if he would have help reorganize the labor movement towards the direction of the Japanese model â€“ he certainly had the kind of vision and that kind of clout. By not adapting the Union movement has hurt itself and with it liberalism in America.

The first and the third events are rooted in the 1950s. The third begins in 1964 and ends in 1972. These three events created an opening for Neocons to gain traction in their assault on the New Deal social contract. American's began to blame the unions for America's competitiveness problems.

How could such a powerful economy with powerful corporations be losing to Japanese upstarts? RCA, Motorola were losing out to Sony and Fujistu (Panasonic). Japanese steel was cheaper, and Japanese cars were of higher quality. â€œIt had to be the Unions fault.â€• Never mind the fact that Japan had unions too, just a different kind.

The proper response to this would have been to alter our collective bargaining system to look like the Japanese system: Break up the oversized companies, like General Motors, and Break up the monopoly of Trade Unions to create company unions. Entrenched interest kept this from happening.

GM and perhaps Ford should have been broken up during the 50s but a Corporate friendly Eisenhower Republican Regime wouldn't allow for that - in the mean time, during the 1950s GM reorganized itself into a giant "hair ball" that couldn't be pulled apart - preserving the Empire of Alfred Sloan's corporate heirs. Had Eisenhower broken up GM into 5 companies, Ford into two the U.S. would have entered the 1960s with nine auto companies and a higher level of competitiveness. Today the market is doing what Eisenhower should have done but with Japanese, Europeans and Korean's walking away with the American Market.

The combination of Vietnam, Assasinations/deaths of liberal leadership, and the Japanese economic onslaught created the opening and the traction that the reactionaries were looking for. Without a strong union movement to influence the working class into leaning left of

center, there was little to stop religion from using its influence to go the other way. Meanwhile reactionary economist were creating extensive treatise against unionization as creating distortions in the economy. The decline of the Unions and collective bargaining only means that we are backing our way back into the Gilded Age.

But the real problem is the reactionary elites. One can ask the question, in regard to the Straussians: What came first, the Chicken or the Egg? Did Straussians create the Neocons or did the Economic Elite find and develop the Straussians?

I think if you are an Elite and you want to perpetuate your position, if you were one of the Gilded during the Gilded age, you want to recreate that era - then you are going to go shopping for philosophies that support it. (In the middle ages, the emerging bourgiouse found Calvinism with a theology where wealth and salvation were merged.) My guess it was such republican elites that were endowing universities with chairs for the likes of Strauss and Neocons in other disciplines such as economics, politics and philosophy - all interrelated.

But this doesn't totally explain their behavior. The movie ***"Its a Wonderful Life"*** lays out the politics quite well. There are two kinds of economic elites: Sam Wainwright and Mr. Potter. Wainwright is out to get ahead, but is not concerned with holding back his fellow Bedford Fallsian brethren of lesser means â€“ in fact he is inclined to help them when and where he can. Mr. Potter, on the other hand, is not only trying to get rich, but is also trying to hold others down. (*"What does that [giving the working man hope and decent housing] get us but a discontented lazy rabble instead of a thrifty working class."*) Moreover, Wainwright gets rich by building new factories, new industries that create wealth for everyone, whereas Potter gets rich, not by building new, but taking a bigger slice over what exists â€“ weakening others, and creating nor building nothing new. In the end itâ€™s really the mentality of the Mr. Potter class of our elite that is driving everything in the Neocon agenda.

Which really comes down to whether you believe if people are basically good or bad. This takes us back to a question of jurisprudence all over again. 80 to 90% of all people are decent. For discussion I'll just use 80%. 80% sees how the system works, how if everyone does their part and cooperates everyone benefits so it doesn't make sense to cheat, lie, steal. Maybe 20% are intrinsically selfish and narrow-minded and can't understand the logic of cooperation - they would lie cheat and steal if they could or if they had to to get ahead - they cant understand the logic of the system. Of these 20% maybe 90% of them are manipulated by the legal systems combination of carrot and sticks to not cheat (at a gross level). That means maybe only a few people are truly and irreparably bad for the system and society.

Now if you are one of the people who are bad, you are going to look at other people and see them as being bad as well. This leads you to a Straussian position that suggests that people need to be controlled by religion. The irony of this, if true, would mean that we have an elite that is basically bad or maybe even evil, that seeing the world as basically evil, believes that men need to be ruled over illiberally. This creates the curious situation where the very people who should be ruled over (incarcerated perhaps), are instead attempting to become the rulers, to rule over the 80% who are basically good and don't need to be ruled over anyhow. The fact is this creates a dangerous situation that can lead to tyranny.

In my view, without the economic clout of the elite this movement never occurs. Without

their funding the movement would be moribund. The religious right would never be properly organized nor have the resources to have an impact. But without the religious right the Neocons would never have the numbers to succeed. The situation starts to look a lot like the Naziâ€™s and the grafting of reactionary nationalist with conservative industrial interests. The elite quickly lost control as the zealots would settle for nothing less.

Will the center hold?

If you read the new book by Richard Evans "The coming of the Third Riech" the Nazi's were intent creating a single party state in Germany. The Modern American Neocon tactics and events are similar to Germany's - except, instead of ethnicity they use religion as the tribal marker: From coming to power during a constitutional crisis, and being installed to power by back room bargaining of very old men, to claims of being a persecuted majority that has been stabbed in the back (dangerous because it can lead to stabbing back as German nationalist did to horrific extent), to loathing international institutions, to concordats with the Catholic church, to breaking up of the independent labor movement, to remanufacturing history and mythmaking that emphasized their constituents being the creators of the nation (Aryan's in Germany/Religious fundamentalist as founding father's in the U.S). The parallels are frighteningly similar. In the end, economic elites lost control to nationalist zealots.

The center, I believe, is the perpetuation of traditional Common Law jurisprudence. The Nobel Laureate, Economic Historian, and Washington University Professor, Douglas North, said that Institutions, be they economic or political or otherwise, are shaped by ideology and belief systems. They reflect the culture. Democracy is based upon restraint. We belittle political correctness, but it is an act of cultural restraint, where the majority restrains itself for the sake of allowing a minority to flourish. This is the mark of an advanced civilization. The religious zealots are in fact of another culture. The reactionary Elite still another. They are "the discontented rabble". The modern institutions of American government do not reflect their culture. They want institutions that reflect their culture, beliefs and ideology. They want and need a tyranny of the (bare)majority (which is easier to manufacture than supper majorities); therefore they attack and tear at the institutions and long to make them or remake them to a shape that reflects their culture. This is what the Naziâ€™s did as well.

At the bottom of all of this is the legal culture. We shape the law, but the law in turn shapes us, including our culture, our ideology and our institutions and our politics. We created laws of equality but then have had to work hard and evolve to a society of equality. If the reactionaries alter the legal culture, the rest might follow suit, paving the way for a permanent alteration of the political institutions and the political culture. Take a hard look at banana republics.

All of this makes this climatic battle of the religious zealots fantastic to behold as well as frightening. The battles going on in the senate over filibusters are as epic as the Battle of Britain. I suspect that this is the center. That means, perhaps, Senator Reid is a sort of Churchill of our times and our politics. If a simple majority in the Senate can overturn the legal culture than we will be in a more difficult situation. What angers me the most is the fact that a few rich people imported Strauss, and with Strauss, not just his philosophies, but the whole German tradition of a politics of dueling philosophies over our government and our society. The likes of Oliver Wendell Holmes should never be traded in for the likes Strauss, Nietzsche and Marx.

Posted by: Timka | May 1, 2005 05:55 PM | #

A broad ideology can't prevail politically in America unless you eliminate the common law system and its system of pragmatism.

Nice overlong post. Thought-provoking, if a little difficult to track.

However, common law/pragmatic philosophy is plainly ideological. You argue for a kind of legal positivism. In my view, HLA Hart and the American positivists (really, most American legal theorists are positivists, with a few exceptions here and there like Lon Fuller)can make their theory work only by retaining the fantasy the Constitution is so basic, so equalitative and fair, it is essentially unpolitical. This assumption is plainly ridiculous even if we refuse to acknowledge a "prelegal" morality.

The Constitution obviously is law intended to protect private property. It is drenched in "theory," my friend.

Posted by: slothrop | May 1, 2005 06:33 PM | #

Larry Lessig and Cass Sunstein are recent purveyors of legal positivism ("fidelity" theory of adjudication). Really depressing, because these guys are as "progressive" politically as you'll find in legal studies (critical legal studies excepted). Positivism just knocks the air of really needed critique of constitutional law. big bummer. By degrees of creeping false-consciousness, legal positivism vindicates the "straussians" anyhow.

Posted by: slothrop | May 1, 2005 06:53 PM | #

Unfortunately, I'm not in possession of a winning strategy, but I can recognize a losing one. Limbaugh and his allies are playing to win total power. When their personal foibles place their necks in the noose, the ACLU or whatever bunch of supposedly well meaning fellows who rescue them are acting irresponsibly. They could easily have said "Mr. Limbough has called for harsh penalties against drug users and has often sneered at the bill of rights. We hope his experiences teach him something." But, no. It's like finding Ted Bundy getting his ass kicked by some prospective victim, rescuing him and dropping him off at the women's shelter. and as you drive off, smugly congratulating yourself on how fucking principled you are.

Posted by: citizen k | May 1, 2005 07:32 PM | #

And speaking of climactic battles, T W Croft has an interesting additional explanation for the assault on US pensions.

He suggests that the pension funds have been leaders in corporate reform and "responsible investing," supporters of SOX and other anti-corruption laws, and that the neo-thugs want to get rid of this collective expression of the common people's ethics. So aside from looting the piggy bank and transferring wealth into the pockets of the investment banker class, destroying pension funds would remove a fairly powerful lever for corporate reform. Sounds plausible.

It's a longish op/ed but imho worth the time. Croft thinks -- or is he just trying to rally the dispirited troops -- that the neocons have had their high tide and are on the run. I would sure like to believe him.

Posted by: DeAnander | May 1, 2005 07:52 PM | #

Timka

I think that is in the ball park.

Slothrop. Common law is absolutely, positively, not legal postivisim. Legal postivism did not exist in 1776, and to bad it ever came into existence. One will be hard pressed to find any legal philsopher who has ever tried a case in real life. The first time they find out what a mess it is they leave to hide in the academy.

As to the Constitution, read if and you will find it is astonishingly open, rather than closed, and indeterminate, at absolutely critical points, in a way that any common law lawyer should be comfortable with, but, no philosopher.

One of the fundamental divides is between the Anglo American world and the European comprehensive ideology/philosophy world. It is nice to see it recognized.

On fundmental problem of American politics today is that Marxism completely took over the source question domain and shut out competition. So, for example, it is impossible to find a modern American mainstream economist who is capable of emotionally facing source questions. Restated, this is a competitively solvable problem. I mention it because I believe Billmon does an excellent job on source questions. Unfortunately, this means the analysis is trapped in its marxist/european past, which has proven inadequate to the task, and equally important, the analysis is guaranteed to be in unacceptable terms because they are, fairly enough, tainted. The situation begs for some new work.

Posted by: razor | May 1, 2005 07:59 PM | #

razor

I didn't say common law/stare decisis is legal positivism. legal positivism is a way to justify judge-made law.

The "source" question doesn't even exist for positivism in general because it is only concerned about procedure, which is also another way to say: concerned about defending the status quo. The status quo for law is defense of property.

See ANTHONY J. SEBOK, LEGAL POSITIVISM IN AMERICAN JURISPRUDENCE. Good one covering this issue.

Posted by: slothrop | May 1, 2005 08:51 PM | #

razor

Read the 1st Amendment: You will find no better example of the closed system of the law as defense of the capitalist mode of production.

Posted by: slothrop | May 1, 2005 08:55 PM | #

Slothrop

I didn't mean to sound abrupt about reading the constitution. However, I am an atheist in the church of the capitalist mode of production. How "Congress shall make no law" supports your conclusion I don't get.

Nor do I believe that procedure is only about defending the status quo. I would suggest, quite to the contrary, the history of procedure evidences what was suggested above, that the wealthy elite is attacking the system because procedure is its enemy. Jury trial is a nice example. And the New Deal evasion of jury trial's to justify administrative law is a nice example of how the Left provided a new source of power for the wealthy, by getting out of the common law and federalising control of the economy. Sooner or later the robber barons will take that power.

We are agreed there are no source questions in legal positivism, and I assume, all postivisms, including Friedmans seminal paper using positivism to justify ignoring reality in doing economics.

Posted by: razor | May 1, 2005 09:23 PM | #

If the 1st didn't want to defend property, the "fathers" would have included something like: ...and not private entity shall abridge the right...

Posted by: slothrop | May 1, 2005 09:30 PM | #

Slothrop, aren't you being anachronistic? 1700's USA did not really enjoy the concepts of "entities" that we have today not did the drafters live in our world where "economics" is considered a separate sphere.

Of course, the drafters of the constitution were men of property and believers in order, but that's not all they were.

Posted by: citizen k | May 1, 2005 09:56 PM | #

citizen k

True, the corporation and consumer capitalism were mostly nonexistent. But, elites of the time were of course aware of the valuable intersection of law and class politics to set the stage for consumerism. For example, Franklin combined position of postmaster in Philly with newspaper ownership because the law required the government Post to deliver printed matter for free, permitting what amounted to local monopolies on news circulation. This changed in 1758 when, as postmastergeneral, Franklin stopped the practice because he knew, due to his pro-colonial sentiments, he would lose his office and likely also his control of news distribution.

Just one anecdote demonstrating how our ancient elites used law to affect the social relations of cultural (re)production favoring elite accumulation.

Posted by: slothrop | May 2, 2005 10:23 AM | #

oh...As it turns out, even the days of revolution proved accommodating of elitist, straussian(!) controls of the dissemination of public record and culture. Lone pamphleteers were indeed lonely.

Posted by: slothrop | May 2, 2005 10:27 AM | #

Slothrop: forgive me, but *Just one anecdote demonstrating how our ancient elites used law to affect the social relations of cultural (re)production favoring elite accumulation.* seems to translate as "people look out for themselves." Ben Franklin's ideas on how to make a

bundle coexist with his strongly anti-capitalist theory that once you've made a comfortable bundle you have an obligation to drop earning and move to public service - something that our current corporate leaders would find incomprehensible. Jefferson's slaveholding aristocratic life-style coexisted with his doctrines that property arrangements of one generation have no claim on those of the next and even his suggestion that confiscating the estates of the French aristocracy would be smart. And the range between a frank asshole like Gouvenor Morris and Tom Paine is rather wide even though old Tom used the word "God" frequently, seemed happy with private property, and never used the term "means of production" in his life. My point, I guess, is that the vulgar Marxist reduction of human beings to economic cogs seems no more valid than that of the Chicago school.

Posted by: citizen k | May 2, 2005 12:36 PM | #

I could provide many more examples of the way elite "founders" of the early nineteenth century exploited emerging communications technology --(subsidized expansion of post network ahead of demand, early telegraphy capture by elite politicians (F.O.J. â€œFogâ€• Smith's obstruction of a "postalized" telegraph system, etc.)--demonstrating how the coordination of law and deployment of technology assured elite control of economic development resulting in consumer capitalism. Only businesses and elites used the post until postage reforms in 1840, and even by tyhe end of the century under 10% of uses of the telegraph were personal.

The history amply demonstrates how elites consciously mobilized the use of communication and transportation resources to organize competition among capitals and exclude individuals.

Any "vulgar" analysis would retain the profound mystification that early elites were not primarily interested in advancing capitalist class interests.

Posted by: slothrop | May 2, 2005 12:56 PM | #

economics was wholly integrated in the affairs of the young united states' gentry, merchant, lawyer & plantation owner elite. one only need look at the various land companies that drove expansion and profiteering. as paine demonstrates in his appendix to *common sense*, liberty, natural rights & territory claims of the current inhabitants of the land did not even calculate into economic equations:

> It is by the sale of those [Western]lands that the debt may be sunk, **without burthen to any**, and the quit-rent reserved thereon, will always lessen, and in time, will wholly support the yearly expence of government.

Posted by: b real | May 2, 2005 01:16 PM | #

Rocketman and b: I'm reduced to a "sure, but so what?". We know that the elites were the elites and that they wanted to (a) look after themselves and (b) improve the prosperity of the nation - something that they certainly did not see in terms of a network of proletarian communes. And they stole land from the Indians and enslaved Africans people too. But how does putting that in the language of academic marxism advance knowlege in any way? Jefferson's class role does not in any sense rob the "inalienable rights" of any power, and Hamilton's ties to finance don't mean that habeus corpus is a fraud.

Posted by: citizen k | May 2, 2005 01:35 PM | #

But how does putting that in the language of academic marxism advance knowlege in any way?

a) because history is class conflict

b) because "superstructure" (law, culture) represents/reproduces ruling class interests

c) because knowing how and why elites "make history behind our backs" helps us to know our enemies

d) normative dimension obvious: expropriate the expropriators

Of course, the present law can in no way be used by oppressed persons to confront capital. Marxism helps to sweep away the bourgeois fantasy of "equal under the law" at any point in American history.

In moments like this I can almost think of myself as "marxist."

Posted by: slothrop | May 2, 2005 02:21 PM | #

This marxist tangent is revealing.

First, it helps explains why Bush is in office. Some just won't let go. Hegemony for me, not you!

Second, marx and strauss are cousins. Both are out of a European tradition where their comprehenive philosophy gave them the truth of it all from which to pass judgment on other lives.

Third,there seems to be no room for people in this theory, exactly like U of C economic balderdash, which is the scientific materialism side of the marxist approach, with Strauss and such picking up the psudeo philosophical side.

Isn't it more sane to stick to the choices at hand, and not push the human struggle for power behind the curtain of jargon? The historical test has conclusivel proved that marxist analysis is the definitive tool for exploiting ones fellow man. Kim Il Sung. Castro. Yuk and yuk.

Posted by: razor | May 2, 2005 02:32 PM | #

razor

I tend to be devil's advocate for marx around here. Somebody has to do it. Generally, I agree Marx's critique of capital is correct. Read *Capital* and there's not much to disagree with. Schumpeter, Pareto, and others who are bougeois economists basically agree w/ this assessment of Marx's analysis.

The problem of socialism (one country? autonomous marxism? "third way"?) is difficult to implement, and I agree more w/ third way literature about the value of small-is-beautiful entrepreneurialism.

In any case, I'm waiting to board whatever train leaves the station built by the soulcrushing, necrophilic and deathworshipping apocalyptic form of capitalism embraced by our Great

Men. Get me the fuck outta here.

Posted by: slothrop | May 2, 2005 02:44 PM | #

One of the points I was trying to make is that Politics in Anglo societies follows Common Law.

Common Law developed a bias towards liberty. The real reason is quite practical. Decisions were easier and cheaper to enforce if they were both just and in that vein, Common Law developed a bias towards liberty. Common Law competed against a variety of legal systems inside England and waiting in the wings were Canon Law, Equity Law, among others and on the Contintent Rome derived civil law - from Justinians corpus juris (as I recall). Common Law prevailed partly because of its bias towards fairness, liberty and practicality.

As I said, the culture of the law sets the stage for politics to follow. Our founding fathers like the ring of liberty out of justice and applied it to politics.

But in common law, its a bias, not an absolute. So it gets applied when and where it is appropriate. Our Democracy was following suit. But Straussians are dispatching with pragmatism and introducing philosophy based dogma. Where Straussian philosophy is the optimal solution it will work best (which I doubt really it does - personally I disagree with it - as Europe and Japan are fine examples that prove Strauss false). Fine. But where it is inappropriate it shouldn't be applied. But because of the addiction to dogma and ideology it gets applied. Our politics then descend into a battle of domga's, philosophies, and ideologies, like european contintentals. I prefer the pragmatic approach that we had to be better.

Different illness require different cures. No ideology covers all illnesses. Liberty is great, but we all know that fairness and justice require more than just freedom.

Posted by: Timka | May 2, 2005 02:54 PM | #

Timka

Again, I insist, you need to justify your claims by demonstrating how the Constitution is not grand theory, not ideological. Common law is not separate from the Constitution.

Posted by: slothrop | May 2, 2005 02:59 PM | #

to the comrades

poor old slothrop - seems to be holding the fort here in the midst of anti marxist hysteria

as i've sd often here - i am convinced that many people - scholars included - who attack marx - have never read him except perhaps in some form of primer. the energy invested in investigating the fool strauss could be worthily invested in the works of old karl & his pal, engels

to call him an economic determinist seems to miss the point. as slothrop has pointed out - the basis & vision of his critique have stood the test of time & is still transforming

to ridiculise - it by reference to kim il sung or kim song il seems to me to be plain hysteria & not scholarly in any sense. vulgar

i see no references here to the holy family, the german ideology, the grundrisse etc etc

contrary to the hysteric approach taken here - that marxism in the academy was limiting - the contrary is the truth - there are disciplines that wouldn't exist without the foundation work of karl & his infinite & continuing colleagues - in economics, history, anthropology, philosophy etc etc etc

you will of course speak of a popper, or a bell, or an arendt or a whole series of minor workers in the field of knowledge but they are bare shadows if they are even that

i was, i am & remain a marxist who uses marxism throughout my day to day work & find it always transforming & limitless in its possibilities

a good poem for me is one that can literally be toran apart by its own contradictions & then is rebuilt through tose very contradictions - oppositions as a sign of health. marxism remains for me the only science that really alows for those configurations

venceremos

Posted by: remembereringgiap | May 2, 2005 03:13 PM | #

Slothrop

I am not sure if this is a complete tangent or close to some core problems, but the Constitution is anti grand theory. It is perhaps the most superbly crafted transaction document of all time. The English Constitution is, in a sense, the common law. The second American constitituion is America's written transaction document that establishes a common law democracy. Putting aside the ignored preamble, there are no theory words in the Second American Constitution. There is, for example, no discussion of the theory of three distinct powers of state. Instead that theory is assumed and the transaction document describes how the power is allocated. Right or wrong, that is how the engine is designed.

And the legal means that provide leverated power over their fellow man to the "elite" today did not exist for almost century after that doucment was written.

Posted by: razor | May 2, 2005 03:16 PM | #

there is a level of ahistoricism that i find disturbing

documents, constitutions, treaties do not exist in & of themselves - they also possess a social reality. & the social reality of the two constitutions have so much written about them that is rich & fullsome that i find them here - as if they are naked & neutral. they are not. their clothes are particular & they are not innocent even tho the great ho chi minh had a bit of festichistic realtion to the american constitution

Posted by: remembereringgiap | May 2, 2005 03:21 PM | #

razor

The way you embrace the reification of the Constitution, this fetishism, is terrifying.

Posted by: slothrop | May 2, 2005 03:37 PM | #

slothrop

so what is it that an Englishman reifies in his constitution?

You are being silly and apparently are not familiar with how text, in marxist's societies, is used to specify the allocation of power between decision makers. Silly silly silly.

Posted by: razor | May 2, 2005 03:59 PM | #

what texts? what marxist societies?

the utter naivetÃ© in relation to marxism is simply beyond me

on the conrary my dear razor - i find your constitution fetishism as terrifying as slothrop does

who has common law protected. what has common law protected. & you speak in an actual environment - where the judicicial appareil in - anglo saxon countries is either completely corrupted or a bad joke at the expense of the poor

Posted by: remembereringgiap | May 2, 2005 04:12 PM | #

Slothrop, giap, et al

I guess we must agree to mutual terror.

The idea that subtleties of marxist societies not yet being in being can't be appreciate by a reifier like me .....

makes me feel tired all over. You have both completely missed the point or wouldn't be throwing reification around. Which, is illuminating in its own way.

Apologies to the rest.

Posted by: razor | May 2, 2005 04:15 PM | #

razor

> It also seems right to insist on reading constitutional provisions not as isolated dots, but in light of one another. Interpretations that make sense out of the document as a whole have the advantage of promoting coherence and rationality in constitutional law. Where coherence and rationality are possible, surely they should be obtained. It follows, for example, that one ought not to read the equal protection clause in a way that would do fundamental damage to the explicit protection of private property and freedom of contract. A socialist system would indeed be unconstitutional.--Cass Sunstein, from *The Partial Constitution*

Based on the way you reify the Constitution, common law would/could produce a humane society not oriented to property accumulation. As even Sunstein notes, this is not possible.

Posted by: slothrop | May 2, 2005 04:30 PM | #

christopher hill, ep thompson, eric hobshawn, george rudÃ©, barry carr amongst many many others place constitutions, treaties, accords, text - in theor proper - non reified context

Posted by: remembereringgiap | May 2, 2005 04:41 PM | #

& more simply there is the inference if not the presupposition that the centre is holding

i do not think that is the case

i feel there has been - in the united states, in britain & in australia irreparable damage has been done to the judical process, the judicial mechacnism if not the whole appareil altogether

in the immediate future - one could not reasably expect these institutions to rehabilitate themselves

on the contrary - i feel it is going to get a lot worse - so much so that it would take herculean if not revolutionary efforts to stabilise them

Posted by: remembereringgiap | May 2, 2005 04:46 PM | #

Slothrop: "because history is class conflict" is either false or tautology. Old Ben Franklin was surely motivated by his class and economic interests, but he clearly thought about pussy at least as much as money and he wanted also to be famous and to do good deeds. Calling some of these "superstructure" is as useful and informative as Hayek's equally reductive view of human beings. Marx, writing before Freud, and Jane Goodall, and Crick&Watson, and at the dawn of archeology, and without the benefit of post-Marx historical work like Braudel, and deeply influenced by the silly totalizing ambitions of Hegel and the racist and eurocentric strictures of his time, cannot be faulted for the limits of his analysis, but fetishization of Marxian terminology is absolutely bloody useless.

Giap - I agree that Marx is surely more interesting than Strauss, or Popper for that matter, but real historians argue about the One True Faith of Marx about as much as real biologists insist on Darwin's specific formulations of evolution.

Posted by: citizen k | May 2, 2005 04:56 PM | #

a-hem...[cough]...red-baiting...[cough]...occam...

Posted by: b real | May 2, 2005 04:57 PM | #

I don't think the Constitution *or* Magna Carta were ever intended by their authors to protect "the common man" or anyone lower than that on the pecking order. Women, slaves, debtors, peasants, none of these were the intended beneficiaries of these "sacred documents" iirc.

What these documents did -- if I renember my history books -- was to limit the power of the Throne (hereditary kingship, or in latter days "The Gummint") over the baronage and yeoman gentry. Not that this was a Bad Thing (TM): this limitation of power was slowly extended to protect lesser persons (up to a point) and resulted in the (embattled) notion of equality under the law, universal suffrage, and "inalienable rights" for persons even outside the original bastion of whiteness, maleness, and property-ownership.

But at the time the Constitution was written, one of the simple, "non-ideological," contractual relationships or transactions it enshrined and protected was the sale and purchase of a living human being at a slave auction. What was at issue for the framers, iirc, was the Crown's (imperial) right to charge arbitrary tax on said sale or interfere with this "private" business deal. It took an old-fashioned (European, too) ideological movement

with an overarching Kantian/Christian agenda (the anti-slavery movement) to assert that this particular contractual relationship was immoral and invalid *per se*.

On purely pragmatic non-ideological grounds, slavery is justifiable in business terms [though never ideology-free in practice, as ideology always functions in defining the slave population by race or caste or gender]; imho the oligarchs are working their way around to it again with the assault on workers' rights and pensions, the debt-slavery bill, etc.

The workers' rights they are battling so earnestly to destroy are presumably equally repugnant to *e.g.* razor, as they are not enshrined in the Constitution nor the MC; they were won at great risk over a period of decades, by direct action on the part of committed ideologues with an absolutist moral and philosophical agenda (Wobblies and other labour organisers), often influenced by the teachings of that bad old boy Marx.

whether their moral absolutism -- the reification of Marx, perhaps? -- was ideal or less than ideal, I am still grateful for the 8 hour day, the weekend, the minimum wage, the grievance process, and other landmark achievements which Big Business -- in the name of sacralised and abstracted property rights -- literally killed people trying to prevent. I am grateful also (of course!) for what limited protection the Constitution offers me from authoritarians in government; but until it also protects me from the growing reach and power of the authoritarian pseudo-governments we call "corporations," it remains an inadequate guarantee of human rights.

sorry if this is somewhat breathless, I write in haste when I really oughter be doing something else...

Posted by: DeAnander | May 2, 2005 05:20 PM | #

citzen k

you are a cheeky devil & i'm afraid i don't know any 'real' historians who aren't marxist or whose interprative skills are borne from that old german

& i'll have to defend my colleague slothrop - in that terminology is also transformative - & is as essential a building block as it was for our pal, ludwig wittgenstein - who seemed to know a thing or two

popper, i wouldn't give the time of day - if i had it

citizen k - perhaps you could name a few of these 'real' historians so i can kick the edifice of my implacable marxism into freefall

for razor - a good nightime read is joseph stalin's & his security chief yagoda's 1936 constitution & their marvellous little history - the history of the communist party of the soviet union(bolshevik) - something it is said art linkletter, clyde tolson, malcolm muggeridge & walt disney always kept by the bedside table for its capacity to illuminate even the darkest nights of their soul

Posted by: rememberеringgiap | May 2, 2005 05:31 PM | #

Slothrop. I am not saying that the constitution is non-ideological. It had a bias towards liberty - but it was not wholey liberal (libertarian), there was much in it about a status of servitude.

I repeat (paraphrasing) Douglas North: Institutions are shaped by beliefs and ideology. Ideology and beliefs are shaped by culture.

But in regard to law their is a dialectic thing going on: we (our culture) shape the law, but then the law also shapes us.

Common Law emerges out of a patchwork system of competing legal systems. Common Law eventually has hegemony over all formal normativity (to coin a new word I suppose). Why did common law succeed? It was fair and efficent. By fair and efficient, I mean it incurred a low transaction cost upon society. Why? Because everyone was willing to submit to its decisions. Why? Well part of it was a bias in the common law towards liberty.

Liberty enters culture by way of the common law. Common law adopted a bias towards liberty. Why? because its an inexpensive rendering (no or low transaction cost to a decision.) By way of Common Law, a Liberty bias enters the culture. By way of culture liberty bias enters the into societal institutions, including the constitution. And as I just said, the constitution has a bias towards liberty, but is not an ideological manifesto for liberty (that goes, I suppose, to the declaration of Independence).

I tend to agree with the notion that the Constitution is an instrument set out to govern over the bargaining process amongst various interest in society.

In America there is only one principle: Free Contract. The constitution is construed largely around this issue. Free contract a the governing principle of society means that the ideology of liberty, in order to have free in free contract, is an integral component.

But the bigger issue is the trade off between the principle of fairness and the principle of freedom. Fairness is a communitarian value. Freedom is a libertarian (liberal) value. Sometimes Fairness and Freedom are the same. But most ofthe time they are not. Bush and the neocons want freedom, but freedom sans fairness because such an idiological combination supports what they are really after: ever greater concentrations of wealth and power. Without a notion of fairness, the Neocons don't have to stop and ask whether or not concentrating power and wealth is fair.

The way I see it a society that is patently unfair is rendered brittle. As wealth and power concentrate, its like standing up in a dugout canoe. Calamity of epic proportions becomes increasingly likely. But a society that combines and balances the notion of freedom off and with the notion of fairness is like a dugout canoe tethered to an outrigger, rendering society immensley stable, almost unsinkable.

Bush and the neocons want freedom, they preach it all the time, but the only time they preach fairness is whent you are talking about taxing the wealthy. The rest of the time they say life is not supposed to be fair.

But from this conversation I've come to the conclussion that the Gilded Age created an aristocratic class that prior to then, never existed in American society. Prior to 1860s, white America was inherently egalitarian. The constitution and the legal and political institutions reflected this. The Gilded Class that came into being don't fit into this culture, and so don't fit into the institutions handed down from the founding generations: by that I mean the constitution, the political culture and the legal culture.

Thus we have a radical aristocratic class that wants to over through the institutions and

structures that we inhereted. They are a discontented class. They want tear down the existing institutions and erect new institutions or reformulate existing institutions that reflect their culture.

But by an large, as elites they are not broad enough to alter the culture. So what do they do? They go shopping for a philosophy, an ideology and a religion that supports this, they also go shopping for other discontented groups. Strauss wraps all this up together in a neat package. So does Calvinism - but only discontented calvinism.

Presbyterians and Congregationalist long ago made their peace with the existing institutions. In fact they created them. Early formal Calvinist were anti-state religion. Calvin largely felt that when the Prince's of northern Europe got their hands on Lutheranism, they fauled up the theology. The Calvin tradition early on was largely a non state development. In Calvin based refomations, the Princes did not lead, they followed. It was not the King in Scotland that made Scotland prostestant, Nor in Holland. And Calvinist in England bristled at the bastardization of Anglican religion.

The Gilded Class finds in Calvin and Strauss what they want and a pattern in how to proceed. But they have to find other discontents. Well basically that brings them the whole Bubba Belt of the south who are still fuming about the violation of states rights. Perhaps it was money from the Gilded Classes that breathed life a-new into the "states rights" doctrine - and got such minded folks onto the supreme court. At the intersection of Gilded Discontents and Southern Discontent, you have Fundementalist/revivalist religion.

The Neocon Republican party is a bunch of discontents - all with a culture that does not map to the institutions of our democracy as they have been handed down to us. So they want to tear them down, destory and or remake them to look like their culture. The best way to do that is to lie and say that the culture was originally fundementalistic and the founding fathers all fundementalist etc... and that they are only trying to return to the original culture and the original institutions.

They are revolutionaries. Strauss gives them a basis for living in the same tent: Religion for the masses, elitism for the elites. Calvin gives them the kind of religion to pursue - because as Calvin said, there is no surer sign of God's election to salvation than wealth - therefore property rights are sacred, and taxation an abomination.

What Straussian analysis allows is for us to articulate a rebuttal: The Republicans are the revolutionaries, that want to disavow the founders and the framers of the republic. One can begin by pointing out that they want to destroy the egalitarian nature of American culture. They want to destory the fairness doctrine in American political and legal culture. etc. If they want to prove their fidelity to American values they can begin by restoring the aristocracy tax. That which you subsidize you get more of, that which you tax you get less of - therefor if they want to be real American's they have to reintroduce the Aristocracy tax.

Posted by: Timka | May 2, 2005 05:36 PM | #

Actually, I was just in a room full of illustrious and (like me (less illustrious) historians discussing how in the last 30 years, right-wing political rhetoric has blindsided the left because it has created a rhetoric of no hope of present action based on future possibilities (c.f. current millenialisms) and no hope of present goods being stabilised by the past (c.f. destruction of all that is humane in politics). We kept speaking in the terms of "modernity", "post modernity" etc., but from time to time had to remind ourselves that what we were

really talking about was a Marxian analysis of time.

BTW - Capitalist time speeds up and destroys things that try to live at human speeds. Imagine frogs in a vast, but gradually accelerating blender. Metal blades have their place in the world, as does frog flesh - but speed kills.

So, yes, Marxian analysis is considered by many essential precisely because it attempts to define its terms as well as possible. FWIW, there are no longer reputable historians who are not materialists. But Marxian analysis is not exactly the sort of thing you found governments on, because its chief precision is to show just how intertwined into contradiction (read creative, accelerating destruction) are the worlds of human reproduction (babies, food, family, you know the good stuff) and reproduction of capital (mega-arbitrages with nearly virtual capital, and run by logics that seek to approach pure abstraction). Marxism tells the logic of how our time works, and our ideals are being sliced and diced right along with our time. So, no, one does not build governments from Marxian critique. However, knowing about the blades and the fact that they are continuously kept running by the decisions of individual human beings makes real, enlightened human beings. And humane individuals do occasionally run governments. You may dislike Castro for whatever reason, but have you ever tried to imagine Cuba under Ken Lay?

Imagine a government run by engineers. God save us all. But I still want those engineers to staff the bureaucracies and the R&D companies, because their professional competence is to know the difference between a plan and a sellout.

Marxist reasoning is, likewise, devoted to criticizing deceptive social plans. And this is essential because these lovely plans always pretend that the logic of accelerating numbers and the logic of slow flesh does not result in the logic of shrapnel.

Like to say it better, but I gotta go too.

Posted by: citizen | May 2, 2005 06:08 PM | #

Giap: Try finding support for "history is class struggle" in Braudel. Of course real historians are influenced by Marx, but my objection to Slothrop's remarks is that saying something like "Ben Franklin was bloody imperialist and worked for his class interests" tells nothing about Franklin or US history but merely labels the speaker. It's functionally the same as a secret handshake or a gang color, except it says "I'm a member of a snobby academic sect". As a Marxist, you should be interested more in changing the world than in, as E.P. Thompson put it, creating a orerry. (BTW: Thompson certainly took a much more serious view of Paine than as a speculator in Indian property)

Posted by: citizen k | May 2, 2005 06:13 PM | #

you sd it well enough, citizen

Posted by: remembereringgiap | May 2, 2005 06:14 PM | #

Imagine a government run by engineers. - who do you think runs the government of China?

Posted by: citizen k | May 2, 2005 06:15 PM | #

Ã´ citizen k i think i am trying to change the world in this small provincial city in france - like engels i beleve it takes time

Posted by: remembereringgiap | May 2, 2005 06:18 PM | #

I think Timka is onto something with regard to Strauss and who is who, though the south had and still has its aristoracy, and that citizen k is right on the real subjects.

And DeAnander don't assume so much. Gramps was an immigrant, a wobbly, and organized for Mother Jones, but he was no stinking commie.

The second Constitution of the United States of America is a transaction document that describes how the power of a federal government of thirteen American States will be held. I have zero interest in red baiting. I didn't even know it was still possible. A transaction document is a transaction document is a transaction document in any stage of literate society. The Bill of Rights is an add on. All agreed that many rights were not enumerated therein. Those were the ones all could agree on. They were rights as against the federal government, which was a limited government. They never claimed to be other. I hate to belabor the obvious, but man oh man oh man..... Let's not mispresent the record or the facts.

"He has combined with others to subject us to a jurisdiction foreign to our constitution and unacknowledged by our laws;"

From this thread I see better why Strauss was successful, and how dangerous the game he plays, and why Bush is effectively unopposed. People living in the past.

Posted by: razor | May 2, 2005 06:20 PM | #

Timka,
Prior to 1860s, white America was inherently egalitarian.

I take it you mean that if you run a thought experiment that only considers white people in america, that leaves out all the other people, then you're talking a bout a society that is inherently egalitarian. Yes?

OK, set aside that this way of approaching a society is itself a sort of esoteric fantasy of genocide, and you still have the problem that women were the property of men, that a wealthy man can attach a porch to the house of a poor one, bill him for it, drive him into bankruptcy because the law does not protect consumers yet, just those with lawyers...

OK, I'll stop there. But what a fantastical thing to say. *Inherently* egalitarian!

Posted by: citizen | May 2, 2005 06:20 PM | #

Commitment to equality is always achieved by people making it happen. This usually involves sacrifice. Nothing inherent about it.

Posted by: citizen | May 2, 2005 06:26 PM | #

the people, citizen k, the people

Posted by: remembereringgiap | May 2, 2005 06:28 PM | #

what's the point of saying injustice is part of American history? Yeah. Obviously. 3/5 votes doesn't take Marxian or Straussian text reading to see the obvious. So what's the point?

It seems the marxian approach and Straussian approaches are equally perfect because both cleverly eliminate crucial tests and metrics in the lives of actual flesh and blood humans in the test and null conditions. Makes for a great con.

Posted by: razor | May 2, 2005 06:44 PM | #

Prior to 1860s, white America was inherently egalitarian.

yeah? tell it to the Irish... tell it to the Jews [oh sorry, they weren't considered "white" back then]. tell it to the DAR... well you get the drift. egalitarian it was not: even among whites the hierarchy of caste and recency of arrival was scrupulously observed. *Herrenvolk* egalitarianism...

I have zero interest in red baiting. I didn't even know it was still possible, he said, red-baiting away zestfully :-)

Gramps was an immigrant, a wobbly, and organized for Mother Jones, but he was no stinking commie -- more gratuitous provocation and baiting? or just quoting "Gramps" himself? if so, please include quotation marks to indicate the source of the insult :-)

The Wobblies were the Industrial Workers of the World -- the most militant and radical socialist workers' organisation ever to grace this sprawling robber-barony called the US. They were generally anarcho-syndicalists (my favourite flavour of Old Lefty), and with their "little red songbook," way more fun than any of the latter-day Trots or Sparts I ever met. Their goal was precisely the opposite of the "company union" on the Japanese plan: they dreamed of uniting all American workers in "One Big Union" to contest with the moneyed classes for control of the economy. They lost. They were murdered, beaten up, tortured, jailed, betrayed, exhausted, wrecked on the reefs of endemic worker racism, and eventually sidelined by FDR's brilliant brokerage of a compromise deal for labour.

I recommend Cosma Shalizi as the example of a modern socialist thinker who disavows Marx (as doctrine or sacred text) w/o jettisoning the power of the Marxian analysis, but rather building on it as modern evolutionary biology builds on Darwin. speaking of which has anyone read Gar Alperovitz yet? naybe I'll take him along on my upcoming guilt-inducing plane flight, as one of the two books I am permitted by "law" (hello, Constitutionality has left the building) in the U.S. of Illiteracy.

Posted by: DeAnander | May 2, 2005 06:59 PM | #

deanander

i'm ploughing my memory - was there a figure in the wobblies called big bill hayward - who was a friend to the magnificent american boxer jack johnson, a friend to the great american singers paul robeson, woody guthrie & cisco houston & sometime drinking pal to the great american writer dashiell hammet - commies all

& that is the fundamental difference between us marxists & the straussians - they cannot sing nor are capable of holding a tune - as any red knows

horst wessel lieder - the robbie williams of fascism

Posted by: remembereringgiap | May 2, 2005 07:07 PM | #

Haywood. but yes. he and Robeson were not, afaik, contemporaries -- Robeson was

pilloried by HUAC, decades later. here's a capsule summary of the FBI's campaigns against labour organisers and civil rights (for Blacks) organisers.

Bill Haywood's working life began at the age of nine [that is not a typo, and quite "Constitutional," as that sacred document contains no language forbidding child labour] in Utah mining; his labour organising career took off as he rose through the ranks of the WFM -- an industry-wide union for western mineworkers.

he was convicted under the Alien and Sedition act (PATRIOT Act of its time) during WWI, on charges of organising a strike during wartime. the IWW, the union with which his name is most persistently associated, was notorious in its day for that very egalitarianism which razor admires so much: they tried to organise both men and women, Blacks and Whites, natives and recent immigrants. this was, of course, viewed by capital and its boughten media of the day as deeply subversive and "unAmerican." a fair chunk of the labour force, of course, agreed :-)

whether Haywood was set up/framed in the early 1900s for plotting the assassination of a politician or whether he actually considered such violent action, we may never know. certainly it was a smear that stuck, damaging his rep with both allies and enemies. when I think about it I am inclined to remember the woman in my recent news post who was anonymously accused of "threatening to cut off the President's head." or that poor damn biologist/artist who is *still* dragging his expensive way through the courts trying to throw off ludicrous accusations of bioterrorism. Big Bill was a lot more threatening to the money establishment than either of those folks, though the biotech interests do seem to have it in for Kurtz.

Big Bill wrote a lot of songs -- mostly iirc pastiche and satirical -- and was a major contributor to the Little Red Songbook. Poet Carl Sandburg, also author of the charming, wistful and uniquely American "Rutabaga Stories" for children, was sympathetic to the Wobbly cause and interviewed Big Bill in jail.

Posted by: DeAnander | May 2, 2005 07:49 PM | #

btw, Stan Goff comments today on the trial of Hasan Akbar and in so doing, touches on a lot of the essential questions about law, jurisprudence, the construction of State power, the illusion of objectivity, etc.

this should probably be filed under "Rush to Judgment" but the threads seem to be cross-pollinating anyway...

Posted by: DeAnander | May 2, 2005 07:58 PM | #

"Prior to 1860s, white America was inherently egalitarian."

I phrased that incorrectly. What I meant was that the distribution of wealth was fairly narrow prior to 1860, compared to say after 1885.

The economic entities were mostly sole proprietorships contracting with sole proprietors. As you get closer to 1860 this becomes less so. Indeed, New England states had corporations, especially in textile mills, and common law rulings increasingly established limited liability for many of these entities. In regard to the Irish, this is precisely the environment they stepped into. It was the beginning of squalor, but nothing compared to

the Gilded Age.

Also, as the 19th century progressed, the frontier moves farther and farther west. That means the opportunity cost that employers had to bargained against shrank, putting down word pressure on labor. The Irish were notable for not choosing to pick up farming, but instead congregated in the cities. This is understandable as their poverty was the result of a crop failure from an agrarian setting in Ireland.

But over all, the disparities in wealth and power in the 19th century were nothing compared to that which emerges in the Gilded Age. And that disparity was triggered by the widespread diffusion of the limited liability corporation, which came about in the 1860s.

The Gilded Age created a class that abhores equality.

Posted by: Timka | May 2, 2005 08:39 PM | #

Jeez, fellers. Big Bill was a wobbly, not a communist (marxist). On the other hand, the class basis of the appeal of arcane doctrines with opaque terminology to clerics/academics is too obvious.

Posted by: citizen k | May 2, 2005 09:40 PM | #

citizen k

You don't say much, but do so with great style. Much appreciated. About your example of Braudel as declamation of class struggle. Not entirely true. He recognized constantly in *Civilization & Capitalism the fact of interclass exploitation. He recoghnized capital as a system of the integration of class interests.*

About his relation to Marxism and his divergences with Marx, much is to be admired about Braudel. First, Braudel is right about the uneven development of capital. He is right about the important difference between the market economy and global monopoly capitalism. He is right about the danger of destroying entrepreneurial capitalism, as advocated by Lenin.

He was wrong about the preference to preserve capitalism in order to avoid the violence of revolution. As the people of Iraq know in their bodies and minds, capitalism kills.

Braudel was a marxist who demonstrated the complex ways capitalism expanded by its own set of logics.

Posted by: slothrop | May 2, 2005 10:37 PM | #

wanted to say: braudel was an erstwhile marxist...

Posted by: slothrop | May 2, 2005 10:40 PM | #

hold on a sec, citizen k. your little BTW comment @ 6:13 is a bit too dishonest to let pass w/o calling you out on it. my point was not that paine was a land speculator, which i don't know enough of the man to pass comment on, but rather one particular example of a crass expression of economics over flesh & blood, of a statesman who has figured a way to cover expenses while ignoring the human element. This was directly in response to your comment at 12:36 that the "reduction of human beings to economic cogs" is not a valid critique of that era, nor any, i take it. your revisionism weakens your credibility, imho.

@Timka - here's an interesting read you might find insightful - essay review of "Inequality in Early America" [pdf]

Posted by: b real | May 2, 2005 11:27 PM | #

God is not on the side of the heavy battalions, but of the best shots.
- Voltaire -

Just one more reason to take aim carefully, even if it requires extra study.

Posted by: citizen | May 3, 2005 01:55 AM | #

Timka makes a good point, in practical experience as outlined in the' Its a Wonderful Life' analogy. This nicely makes the seperation between the innovation (better mousetrap) involved in entrepreneurship, and monoply instinct of crushing competition (along with innovation) as the method of domination. The problem, of course is that the consolidation impulse sucks the oxygen out of competitivness, both locally and globaly. Its a simple distinction that somehow has been lost on the American public over the last 30 or 40 years -- but one most have experienced in some way personaly. The Dems should articulate this point.

Posted by: anna missed | May 3, 2005 06:10 AM | #

Tyrone: You said "history **is** class struggle", and I said that real historians, such as Braudel (one could add many others) don't follow such reductionist view. I did not say, or believe, that interclass struggles don't exist or that capitalism does not involve exploitation or that one needs to renounce Marx or anything similar. However, to me, any attempt to reduce the liberatory element of the American revolution to a upper class charade plastered over naked exploitation is bad history, tin-eared politics, and reflective of an economism that is profoundly anti-human. Thompson's "Poverty of Theory", while bizzarely dated, is a far more eloquent and insightful exploration of this argument than I could ever approach.

Whether one finds capitalism to be good or bad is a different question - and maybe a question with little utility. Is there any evidence to show that human rights, personal liberty, and community are superstructural emanations of economic machinery? Domination and exploitation run through human history just as freedom and community do - and even though Marx didn't have the benefit of the insights of e.g. Feminist analysis or anthropology beyond Victorian orientalism, we do.
Show a little appreciation for the dialectic and evolution.

b real: History is not a sports event where one roots for a team and boos the opponents. If you think Paine's work can be summed up by an appendix showing a lack of modern regard for Indigenous Rights, you are very wrong.

Posted by: citizen k | May 3, 2005 06:37 AM | #

Anna M. Timka's "Wonderful Life" point deserves applause. Of course, our comrades from academe will have a harder time appreciating "trade" but it would benefit them. In my reading of Braudel, he becomes wonderfully corrupted over time as his appreciation of the complexity and richness of trade and industry overcomes his initial Sorbonnesque disdain for mere merchants.

Posted by: citizen k | May 3, 2005 06:48 AM | #

@citizen k - *If you think Paine's work can be summed up by an appendix showing a lack of modern regard for Indigenous Rights, you are very wrong.* we both know that i never made that claim. also revealing is your own claim that *Domination and exploitation run through human history....*

Posted by: b real | May 3, 2005 10:40 AM | #

citizen k

Thank you for acclaim and wonderment for the impressive complexity of things. Thank you also for reminding us the folly to "reduce" demonstrable conflict to the solution of theory.

However, to me, any attempt to reduce the liberatory element of the American revolution to a upper class charade plastered over naked exploitation is bad history, tin-eared politics, and reflective of an economism that is profoundly anti-human.

This is just hyperbolic, a privileged condescension of history tacking onto the immense detail of elite machinations the "but, the ideal was so "liberatory""...trope.

In any case, your posts are fun to read.

Posted by: slothrop | May 3, 2005 11:53 AM | #

The thread here is enormously consistent. Strauss v. Liberals, positivists v. realists.

Posted by: slothrop | May 3, 2005 12:04 PM | #

b: You write *also revealing is your own claim that Domination and exploitation run through human history.....* Is that a controversial claim? Do you have new evidence of the egalitarian kibutzim of Akkadia or of the Yellow Emperor period? Maybe you want to hark back to the idyllic Bonobo period? You've got my vote - this land ape shit is just not working out.

Posted by: citizen k | May 3, 2005 01:29 PM | #

Jeez, fellers. Big Bill was a wobbly, not a communist (marxist).

Yet, when the US government was poised to execute him, he jumped bail and sought refuge in the Soviet Union, where he lived from 1921 until his death iin 1928. He didn't run away to Panama, Tahiti, the Left Bank, S Africa or other popular spots for wanted men to lose themselves. He went to the young USSR, a country which he and many other Wobblies deeply admired.

It seems to me that citizen has caught a bad case of red-phobia and believes that there is an intrinsic contradiction between being a big, bold, funny, courageous American working class hero and being a "red." To citizen, it seems, "commies" are effete, timid, overeducated intellectuals hiding under the ivy-covered stones of the academy, so Big Bill could not possibly have been a Communist.

What citizen seems to forget is that Communism in the teens and twenties was an exciting new force in the world, at the time seeming to offer a way forward and out from under the

stifling class hierarchy of both Euroland and the US. The USCP counted among its members many people whose primary focus was not polishing their obscure Marxist jargon and knifing each other in the back in the Letters pages of journals with a sub list of fewer than 1000, but facing up to Pinkertons' thugs, publishing investigative journalism at the risk of having their presses and their kneecaps smashed, rescuing Black folks from lynch mobs and indentured labour, and the like. There was, for a period of time, a truly "American Communism," the communism of Carl Sandburg, Dash Hammett, and -- I say with reasonable confidence -- Big Bill. But this homegrown American Left was deftly sidelined by FDR and then beaten into the ground by McCarthy, Cohn, the Dulles ("Kray") brothers, and J Edgar... then came the crushing, heartbreaking revelations about the crimes and stupidities of the Stalin era, and anyone who wasn't a complete hardcore ideologue/zealot had a crisis of faith (kinda like the storm of revelations about priestly paedophilia, though on a grander scale -- even more undermining to the loyalty of the faithful). The Party, as you might say, was Over.

Posted by: DeAnander | May 3, 2005 01:50 PM | #

Citizen K

In the spirit of Monty Python letters to the editor, I must strenuously object to the "idyllic Bonobo period." As you must know, Adrienne Rich uses this idealized bonobo period to claim that the "patriarchy" was started by sons raping their mothers and denying the naked ape egg carriers the pleasures of egg carrier on egg carrier sexual enjoyment, yet, the bonobos are only cousins, not ancestors!

Not that I actually disagree, or, am making this stuff up.

Posted by: razor | May 3, 2005 01:56 PM | #

Ah, Rocketman, please don't try the idealist/materialist gambit on someone as crass as me. Liberal ideals are interesting not because we can cleverly point out the moral flaws of the long dead or because we can attempt to put labels on things so we don't have to think about them, but because they have value to actual human beings. Instead of sneering about Tom Paine, it would be more pertinent to consider Rosa Luxemberg's insight " ... liberalism as such is now absolutely useless to bourgeois society it has become, on the other hand, a direct impediment to capitalism from other standpoints."

Posted by: citizen k | May 3, 2005 01:58 PM | #

Citizen K
Assuming I am rocketman, my veering off on a tangent on a tangent in the interest of humor caused only confusion.

Tom Paine is fine with me, and I cannot distinguish idealism from realism in a blind test. I was just enjoying the cite to bonobos, and trying to mimic Graham Chapman reading a blustering letter that undermines itself, by sharing a famous (in some circles) instance where bonobos have entered American leftist discourse in a degraded sloppy science, 180 degrees out of kilter, kind of way.

To get back to Strauss, the point is, that in an era where bonobos and homo sapien sapiens are known to both be apes, study of the western classics as the source of wisdom, is appallingly anti intellectual. The insistence of some on mandatory use of the marxist

schools to define the issues and solutions to American civic issues is a similarl appalling waste.

Posted by: razor | May 3, 2005 02:37 PM | #

razor,

think slothrop is rocketman, and come to think of it, most of the other threads here at the moon find analogy to gravitys rainbow, iraq and the freedom of post war pre- government -- an extended engagement. And that scatological general, was his name meyers? living that book aside, the reading here also fits, if not as full spectrum intellectual amusment, then in sheer exhaustion! pant, pant, don't stop now

Posted by: anna missed | May 3, 2005 02:59 PM | #

citizen k

anti-dÃ¼hring, 18th rumaire of louis bonaparte, civil war in france, grundrisse, gerlan ideology, class struggle in france, misery of philosophy, the holy family the economoc & philosophic manuscripts

just a few works by the old boy - it is clear that they have escaped your attention

Posted by: remembereringgiap | May 3, 2005 03:06 PM | #

razor

The insistence of some on mandatory use of the marxist schools to define the issues and solutions to American civic issues is a similarl appalling waste.

You positivists need to back up what you say, rather than posing admonitions as obvious common sense.

But, that's positivism. It's easy to be brilliant by constantly confirming what exists, rather than by answering why things exist.

Posted by: slothrop | May 3, 2005 03:22 PM | #

And let's be honest, Strauss was a good positivist, also (and so it follows) a moral relativist. Power for power's sake, harbinger of endless pomo "ironies."

Some of us here, though, continue to believe in morality.

Posted by: slothrop | May 3, 2005 03:31 PM | #

my last post Ã razor - my argument with citizen k is entirely other

Posted by: remembereringgiap | May 3, 2005 03:32 PM | #

> Some of us here, though, continue to believe in morality.

Which one?

Posted by: Colman | May 3, 2005 03:41 PM | #

I'm taking notes. And we know where you all live. Whatever else, you can all be be positive about that.

Posted by: Joseph McCarthy | May 3, 2005 03:42 PM | #

> Some of us here, though, continue to believe in morality.

Which one?

Posted by: Colman | May 3, 2005 03:43 PM | #

Slothrop and Citizen K

I apologize for the presumption and am relieved to learn that I am not rocketman. And barely ashamed not to remember enough of the part of Gravity's Rainbow I uncomprehendingly read to have got it right at the start.

"It's easy to be brilliant by constantly confirming what exists, rather than by answering why things exist."

When I play the sage I find the opposite to be true, source questions allow speculative flights of fancy that pass for brilliance, avoid all accountability, and give the source endeavor a bad name; nor, have I read any answers here of why things exist; nor, frankly, will I; nor, do I find it consistent with the claim to be typing away on the internet against "confirming what exists". Where's that internet and its nodes comes from anyway? However, these are but more tangents.

Labeling those, who took it for granted that it is long past time to move on from marxism, positivists, does not make it so, as comforting as the labeling may be to the labeler. However, this tangent is one that is consistently diverting resources from the fight of the day on precisely critical questions of Why.

The startling thing to me is that a post, and a great post by a great writer, about Strauss, and about the paleo conservative attack on enlightment liberalism, has run aground on a tangent about whether marxist analysis is receiving its merited due.

I have seen no one on this post deny that marxist analysis is a tradition with much of intellectual value, though, clearly marxist analysis is inadequate and wrong in fundamental ways, but, mostly, who gives a shit now, aside from starving north Koreans and Cubans who want a better job than whoring for tourists? Get on with it.

Aristotle, I was told by a ref who isn't working now, thought smoke went up because it had upness in it, yet Aristotle can be rewarding and if I had to pick a team of the five all time greats for a Why vs Why competition, I would consider Aristotle, though I think I would go with Chang Tsai instead. But Aristotle's time has past and he is little help on the Why work that needs to be done. Like Aristotle, Marx' time has passed. Straussian and marxians should both get on with it but many, apparently, like republicans, have emotional priorities and prime allegiances based on what cannon they suckled on.

For a better future or for one self?

Posted by: razor | May 3, 2005 04:13 PM | #

razor

when i read your posts i feel i am before a judge in a county court - enough learning to get by but not enough to make real judgement

perhaps that is why in modern america journalese & jurisprudence mirror one another in their shallowness & in the infantile approach they take to the why's

i am not defending the marxxist canon as if i am sucking on its teat - it is quite substantial enough to defend itself from what are in essence paranthetic & essentially thin attacks

you speak of economic determinism but i read nothing in your work which reflects a deeper understanding of karl or of his interpreter & transformers in our time & there are very many

some even in your own apparent area of interest - legal theory - but i do not have to repeat that what passes for jurisprudence is little more than an aside & has become so corrupted as not to be given the enoprmous weight that you do

& yes in part - the poverty & corruption of jurisprudence has a great deal to do with leo strauss & his intellectual companions. however the corruption of modern jurisprudence can not be blamed on commies like me you old son of a son of an immigrant from odessa - if my mammaries serve me well

Posted by: remembereringgiap | May 3, 2005 04:31 PM | #

razor - no problem. Appreciate your insight re. bonobos and Ms. Reich. Given the alternatives, rather the life of a bonobo than the class struggles of a chimp - although Bonobos are currently suffering the fate of all primates that don't have enough automatic weapons, class struggles or not.

Giap. Have mercy - what a tedious list. In english, I think it's the "poverty of philosophy" although certainly plowing through the Grundrisse is misery. I liked the 18th brumaire for the sheer snarkiness of the writing. Imagine the 18th Brumaire rewritten by a modern academic Marxist "History manifests itself as contradiction between the reified concept of the *tragedy* developed to obscure the imperialist aims of the bloodthirsty Athenian pre-capitalist class, and as a comedy in which the proletarian humor of the working class as objectified in placing a foot on the superstructure of a yellow colored tropical labor product ...

Posted by: citizen k | May 3, 2005 04:50 PM | #

Ã´ citizen k

it is so easy to say yet so difficult to believe anybody who has actually read these works could actually say what you are saying. it not only lacks imagination but it also hints at a real absence of coprehension. however you are right misÃ¨re de la philosophie(which i believe was written in french) would translate in english as the poverty of philosophy

i believe the tedium you feign is actorly but it is not substantial

nor do either razor or you mention any of the strauss's marxist contemporaries benjamin lukacs & adorno for example nor any others of the franfurt school

how you & razor can somehow mel marx into strauss is a little beyond me even as a rhetorical exercise. the affinities of strauss with heidegger you never mention - nor mention the parlous influence that has had in most modern philosophy continental or otherwise

your judgements of marx & co are so lacking in depth - i wonder whether your attack from strauss comes from idealised state i know not where. there is a concrete basis to the work of

leo strauss & there are concrete conditions of his influence

i suggested that we follow alabama's suggestion & read the bastard himself - that seems to me the least we can do with our enemies & with the enemies of liberty

but your anti communist catcalling is a routine worth of jackie gleason reading a j ayers

Posted by: remembereringgiap | May 3, 2005 05:19 PM | #

> how you & razor can somehow mel marx into strauss is a little beyond me even as a rhetorical exercise.

Ideologies are dangerous. They have a deadly tendency to become more important than people.

Posted by: Colman | May 3, 2005 05:31 PM | #

> i suggested that we follow alabama's suggestion & read the bastard himself - that seems to me the least we can do with our enemies & with the enemies of liberty

Nah, I can think of a thousand better ways of spending that time. Listen to your own advice on this one and ignore him.

Posted by: Colman | May 3, 2005 05:34 PM | #

colman my irish friend - i see knowledge as a tool & also because knowledge is as passionate to me as are the pleasures of the flesh. they arer equal parts debauch & rigour

marxism as a tool has been a part of my life since my childhood & i have found it completely transforming & a key to wonderment

i accept i might have a yeatsian 'fanatic's heart' but if that is so i have always accepted that this knowledge is not a baton to whack over the heads of other people - i simply do not like it denigrated when i know the persons have either not read the work or have conciously misread it

citizen k made an allusion to thompsons poverty of philosophy which is an empiricist's attack on althusser yet i do not find it impossible to use practically the texts that thompson attacks & thompson himself - i think that is what thinking is - a holding in tension of ideas - to paraphrase f scott fitgerald

i agree with you that when ideologies are just flag to tap the other on the head then they are counterproductive & offensive. slothrops approach i find to be a honest questioning

& to add just another bibliographic note bothe adorno & habermas have written well on jargon

Posted by: remembereringgiap | May 3, 2005 05:57 PM | #

"The time that August Spies anticipated came soon, and the voice for an eight-hour day was soon heard beyond the United States and Canada to the whole world, as workers, peasants, students celebrated May Day and with it, to quote Oscar Ameringer, "the divine message of more money and less work." That "divine message" is actually a faith-based initiative if there ever was one. However, it has been lost in those modern forms of enslavement, debt peonage, forced labor in penitentiaries, export zone sweatshops, mandatory overtime,

multiple job-holding, and feminization of poverty which, even if we are not all comfortable calling it the work of satan, certainly characterizes contemporary planetary labor. For if the eight hour day actually came as a result of May Day struggles, it surely has long since gone.

So, that's what most of us know about Magna Carta and May Day. And what they have in common is loss -- the lost liberties, the lost eight-hour day. They seem to have little to do with each other, separated by thousands of miles and hundreds of years. Even if we put aside geography and chronology for a moment and compared them on the basis of class struggle, it is the difference that seems to stand out. The feudal barons who stood up against King John were themselves large landed magnates, latifundista, who commanded the labor of serfs and villains in the feudal mode of production. The struggle in Chicago in contrast was a class struggle between industrialists and the proletariat, a new type of ruling class even though we dub them robber barons, and a new type of worker, huddled in slums crammed into factories.

While it is true that Magna Carta contained provisions to benefit or to protect Jews, city-dwellers, and merchants, acknowledging in these commercial interests a new historical force, a force which was relatively weak at the time, yet its inclusion signified that Magna Carta attempted to weld together a class bloc, or coalition, providing to the disparate elements methods of dispute settlement, policy making, and over-arching spiritual supremacy of the Christian church.

Magna Carta was a treaty in the class war, and it helped to make a ruling class. As for King John, as soon as he could, he resumed war and discarded Magna Carta but then he dropped dead. The story of his death became the stuff of legend among the peasant commoners conveyed by word of mouth and remembered as oral history even by William Morris who in breathing its bold and blunt heroism I paraphrase. Fleeing his enemies King John lost all his baggage in an onrushing tide of the sea, and in a foul mood took shelter in Swinestead Abbey, Lincolnshire,. "How much is this loaf sold for?" he asked at dinner, and when told one penny he answered, "by God, if I live for one year such a loaf shall be sold for twelve pence!

peter linebaugh magna carta & may day counterpunch

also a very good article in counterpunch on the panzer pope by navarro

Posted by: remembereringgiap | May 3, 2005 06:28 PM | #

razor:
I cannot distinguish idealism from realism in a blind test.

The difference is that a realist believes that events are caused by real things. An idealist believes that events **should be**. The realist studies and tries to learn what really causes things. The idealist fabulates. It is all the difference in the world.

citizen k:
Ah, Rocketman, please don't try the idealist/materialist gambit on someone as crass as me.

I believe the actual distinction was between realism and idealism. Materialism without realism is probably just more of the same mushy relativism.

razor:

> The startling thing to me is that a post, and a great post by a great writer, about Strauss, and about the paleo conservative attack on enlightment liberalism, has run aground on a tangent about whether marxist analysis is receiving its merited due.
>
> I have seen no one on this post deny that marxist analysis is a tradition with much of intellectual value, though, clearly marxist analysis is inadequate and wrong in fundamental ways, but, mostly, who gives a shit now, aside from starving north Koreans and Cubans who want a better job than whoring for tourists? Get on with it.

Iâ€™m sorry that all this seems like a tangent. Let me rephrase: I donâ€™t care if you are Marxist, only if you are a realist. If you do not believe that events are caused by real things (and I donâ€™t mean empirical ones â€“ but real ones. The empirical is always and only data. Causes are always at least partly beyond experience.) then I have no reason to believe that you accept the enlightenment, or science, or any of the bridges whereby people relate as equals committed to a shared world. In short, if you are not a realist, then eventually I expect you to submit to the myths of the fascists whenever they overwhelm you. In this I am responding to the power of billmonâ€™s post:

Billmonâ€™s post

> To the Straussians, rationality does not provide an adequate basis for a stable social order. To the contrary, the Age of Enlightenment has ushered in the crisis of modernity, in which nihilism â€“ the moral vacuum left behind by the death of God â€“ inevitably leads to decadence, decline and, ultimately, genocide.
>
> ---major snip---
>
> As Iâ€™ve said before, the American constitutional edifice reminds me of a house riddled by termites â€“ it looks solid enough from the outside, but lean too hard against a wall and big pieces might start toppling over. And right now, the neocons and their Bible Belt allies are leaning pretty damned hard. There are days (like â€œJustice Sundayâ€•) when the Weimar analogy no longer seems so far fetched.

If you do not believe that the world is caused by the real, what reason would you have to resist when the fascists say â€“ â€œforget the constitution, and here is your invitation to join our youth groupâ€•? What was amazing about the communists in the mid-20th century is that they were the only people all over the world who fought the fascists **after** the fascists won. How could they do this? Ratzinger doesnâ€™t know because he does not believe in anything more real than power.

We are not discussing trivia, but the only grounds we know for staring power in the eye and knowing that it is doomed. Marx is not the last answer for all time, but he was the first theorist of the social who articulated how the social is not just an idea, but something real

â€“ and we honor thatâ€¦

â€¦because there is no longer any aristocratic position of **making** the virtuous result happen.

The reality of social power has overcome all that. Me, Iâ€™m just looking for some pals who can handle (and help me handle) that the best you can do in this world of ours is know a little about what is causing all this creation and destruction. To make subtle skillful differences when society shows openings. Of course this requires a a knowledgeable eye â€“ maybe those labels could help.

Those who aim for to **make** everything come out right believe in themselves, and they become neo-Straussians. Perhaps we are each trying to avoid this position as best we can. That is my hope.

Posted by: citizen | May 3, 2005 08:05 PM | #

citizen

how our friend deanander confuses you with citizern k - is cause for concern but reading deanander as we do - it is clear that it is a typographique rupture & not an epistemologique one

Posted by: remembereringgiap | May 3, 2005 08:12 PM | #

I'm really amused about the serendipity of "citizen k" because elsewhere I have used "citizen kilroy" when I forgot my password.

I wonder if maybe it is a Kafka reference for citizen K, though.

Posted by: citizen | May 3, 2005 08:15 PM | #

i think citizen k was a pal of st just

Posted by: remembereringgiap | May 3, 2005 08:34 PM | #

well said by you, citizen

Posted by: slothrop | May 3, 2005 08:53 PM | #

sorry about that citizen. I just noticed the confusing name convergence. one of yez needs to apply for a name change, say to "Ever-Loving Howitzer of Constructive Criticism"... :-)

meanwhile razor continues to irritate me with these shallow fanfaronades such as *but, mostly, who gives a shit now, aside from starving north Koreans and Cubans who want a better job than whoring for tourists?*

to conflate Cuba and N Korea as if they were identical instances of "actually existing socialism" is imho a mere Coulterism. "who gives a shit" might, for a start, be poor people in Venezuela and elsewhere in S America who are getting medical care courtesy of well-educated, compassionate Cuban volunteers. NK is in no position to do likewise. [and, of course, there are no hungry prostitutes in the US who wish they had a better job... right?]

afaik starvation, NK style, did not happen in Cuba even in the worst of the Emergency Period (just after they had their own localised Peak Oil event, several decades before the

rest of us). looking around at the US today, I don't expect government or people to deal as well with global peak oil as the Cubans did with the withdrawal of the Soviet teat. if given a choice between emigration to Cuba or NK, would one really flip a coin? it sure wouldn't take me more than about 5ms to make up my mind :-) hardly apples and apples.

to subsume all ideological opponents into one strawman -- all Reds are evil, all Cubans are starving prostitutes, all Reds are as evil as all other Reds, to be a Cuban is just the same as being a North Korean, if you are not with us you are against us -- and then hurl rocks at the artificial construct, is easy. it goes well with the glib, kneejerk swipe at feminism in the person of philosopher/poet Adrienne Rich -- whose work I kinda doubt the poster has actually read. I can't recall any refs to bonobos in Rich's essays or poems, though admittedly it has been a couple of decades since I last read them. or is the *en passant* kick at Rich just a "economic girlie man" slur (but with reversed gender) tossed at liberals/feminists?

This marxist tangent is revealing.
First, it helps explains why Bush is in office. Some just won't let go.

this imputation upthread (also from our friend razor) i.e. that old lefties/marxists are somehow to blame for BushCo's election (or election theft -- in 2000 only, or 2004? or both?) is more smoke and mirrors. there aren't enough old lefties to make a power voting bloc that could have swung the outcome of an honest election -- the WTC takedown was not a marxist plot designed to consolidate BushCo power -- and marxists certainly don't own the three leading voting machine companies :-) these are, unsurprisingly, owned by Republicans. exactly how marxists (whether vulgar or academic) could have prevented the BushCo putsch or the 20 year Repub Party buildup to it, or the craven collapse of the Dem Party, is unclear to me. in fact, the largest anti-Bush, anti-war rallies on my coast were organised by a bunch of rather tedious diehard Trots who should not, repeat not, be allowed to play with megaphones. whether ideologically obsessed or not, they provided enough portaPotties and dealt with the City bureacracy quite well. they stepped up to the plate when the organising needed doing.

oh wait. oops, I forgot for a moment -- Everything Bad in the Whole World is Somehow the Fault of Marxism. there, that explains everything :-)

truly it is written than those who claim to have "no ideology" invariably mean that their ideology is of the Right... :-)

Posted by: DeAnander | May 3, 2005 09:12 PM | #

Dear citizen. Sorry for the confusingly similar nom-de-blab,maybe I should adopt "real absence of comprehension" as a homage to the memory of the General. Something appealing in that name, it brings back memories of my school years and my poor, long suffering, professors.

When you say *Ratzinger doesnâ€™t know because he does not believe in anything more real than power*. I think you hit the mark. Strauss is obsessed with dominion over others - that's part of what makes his writing so painful to read.

I have to point out, however, that unless you want to consider the Polish Army communists, to pick just one example, the communists were far from alone in resisting the Nazis/fascists.

The interesting question is why the Communists (big C) were so hapless to resist Stalin and even the Hitler-Stalin pact.

Posted by: citizen k | May 3, 2005 09:18 PM | #

b real: Thanks for the reference. Have printed it out, will look at as soon as I sign off.

In regard to Marx: I was always taught that he was the first theorist to take into account the impact of technology and how it changes things. Prior to that most theorist assumed a static environment.

My objection to Straussianism, is its presence in the American political dialogue to begin with, and the idea it brings with it of imposing a blanket ideology over society. I must say that much of the conversation on this thread is over my head. But my point in bringing up realism, as in legal realism, is that it is a mechanism that is pragmatic, and makes use of whatever philosophy suits the specific instance, or no particular philosophy at all. My second, and more important point, was that the culture at large and the political culture were being shaped by the legal culture and so we have been evolving into a highly pragmatic political system that mirrored the legal system. In my mind this makes both society and politics more stable. You may be a liberal or a conservative, but one small loss over a small question doesn't wipe out your philosophical view point - so you can live with it and move on to the next battle.

What Strauss is bringing to our society is monolythic ideologicalism or ideological hegemony: one ideology for all questions - one answer. This means that we are most likely to get the wrong answer most of the time and that the ideological battle escalates because no one can afford to lose: from being a small patchwork battle field politics becomes a large all or nothing battlefield. This, as I said, makes the filibuster battle one of epic proportions.

I have many friends who believe the good guys will not win. And others who say that the only way the good guys win is if we have major economic catastrophy as we did in 1929 (btw - Roosevelt felt that the only thing that could rescue the Dems in the 20s was a catastrophy - and eventually we got it!). That catastrophy also gave us Hitler and the holocaust. If Senator Reid can hold the fort for another year, and if the Republicans continue to appear distasteful in a fascist religious sort of way, maybe the public will respond, and the Republican majority will whither, at least some. Perhaps then we can demand better policies, enough to see us through to 2008. Like Bill Mons suggest, when the credit card gets maxed out, then the colamity begins.

Posted by: Timka | May 3, 2005 09:35 PM | #

Fair enough brother k (and I am very much enjoying the nom-de-blab flap). It was not just communists.

But I am still impressed by the international record of communists in country after country who provided the conscience of their countries after the war was over. In Vietnam, Korea, China and so many other countries. The success of Marxism in academics was backed less by Uncle Joe's propaganda than by real moral examples that must have had some insight behind them to occur in so many places around the world, so many cultures.

And I do imagine that you can already answer the question of why the big C Communists were hapless to resist Stalin and the Hitler-Stalin pact - you are living in the United States right now, yes?

Posted by: citizen | May 3, 2005 09:49 PM | #

DeA- wrote:
afaik starvation, NK style, did not happen in Cuba even in the worst of the Emergency Period (just after they had their own localised Peak Oil event, several decades before the rest of us)"

The reason it didn't is very interesting. Castro actually cares about the welfare of Cubans and particularly in setting an example for Latin America. So they immediately implemented the knowledge of organic farming that had been previously limited to the Universities. NK had no agriculture system to put in place w/out fossil fuels. Hence, Cubans eating & NK starving.

Posted by: jj | May 3, 2005 09:50 PM | #

There are books the sentences of which resemble highways, or even motor roads. But there are also books the sentences of which resemble rather winding paths which lead along precipices concealed by thickets and sometimes even along well-hidden and spacious caves. These depths and caves are not noticed by the busy workmen hurrying to their fields, but they gradually become known and familiar to the leisured and attentive wayfarer. For is not every sentence rich in potential recesses? May not every noun be explained by a relative clause which may profoundly affect the meaning of the principal sentence and which, even if omitted by a careful writer, will be read by the careful reader? --from Leo Strauss, "The Literary Character of the *Guide to the Perplexed*"

Posted by: alabama | May 3, 2005 10:04 PM | #

It is humbling and disturbingly revealing to find I have upset people for taking positions I have not taken. Apparently some do believe there really is a shortage of marxist study, and, that it is evil baiting to offer up the two examples of marxist leninists in action today.

I appreciate the chance to mull over what this post and these comments have offered. I have a better understanding of why there is yet no effective opposition to the 43rd President of the U.S. and the gang he runs with and why there is great hope there can be.

I admire remembering's bravery for establishing that intellectual rigor is a standard for posting.

DeAnander
Re bonobo's. Wanna bet? I even heard Rich read her poems in person. Assumptions, watch 'em. Principles, live by them.

And, I think that this comment software is helping me write sloppy and I do not need help.

Posted by: razor | May 3, 2005 10:16 PM | #

Alabama: I'm sure RGiap will not be surprised, but Althusser, Strauss, DeMann. and Pope Ratzi all seem so similar to me. Perhaps it is because they are all smart, and my Bonobo level intellect recoils in fear to more comfortable issues. But perhaps it is rather (or also)

because they construct repellent gray worlds in which they are experts and I much prefer those who become experts about the world as God made it (or as it created itself if you don"t like poetry).

Posted by: citizen k | May 3, 2005 10:48 PM | #

No problem, citizen k. I was only trying to imagine what Strauss himself might have posted on this particular thread.

Posted by: alabama | May 3, 2005 10:59 PM | #

@razor OK, let's see your citation for Rich on bonobos. book and page, or lecture and date.

Posted by: DeAnander | May 3, 2005 11:32 PM | #

Okay, you can all fight among each other, but when you bring in my cousins, then you're getting crossing the line.

Whether Rich claimed an idyllic bonobo past is relevant to...what? When feminism was finding a voice back a few decades ago, some people (and who knows if Rich was one) believed their was a former "utopian" state that represented equality that seemed only possible via matrilineal structures. But who hasn't created myths to empower their group?

I mean, what was the idea of a homonculus, except to let men claim maternity, and deny humanity to females?

Throughout history smart people (like Da Vinci) have made stupid claims based upon ideology...which doesn't appear to be ideology because it's the "perceived wisdom."

Anyway, back to bonobos- the really interesting thing about them is that they are yet another example of a social group among primates that undermines the deterministic view of "boys will be boys" and "apes will fight wars, too, to solve problems."

Gorillas have yet another social structure, and the interesting things about these issues is not some bullshit claim that the western classics are not read because humans are apes (in fact, that's the most ludicrous thing I've heard claimed about education for while), but that the study of bipedalism also intersects into the issue of bonobos...of the non-human primates, they walk upright more than either gorillas or apes.

studying them can give hints (and destroy assumptions) long held...and yet their habitat is severely stressed.

The study of primates includes bone structures, and the sort of teeth that existed and patterns of migration...how this is not relevant for study, as it also relates to eco-systems and geology and geography and botany and general biology, is beyond me.

I never knew that people were kept from reading the classics because they also learned about punnet squares or climate types.

And, whatever way someone may or may not have mythologized bonobos, the truth of the matter is that they use sex to decrease group tensions, rather than dominance displays. If Rich did make some story about bonobos, her misinformation or your presentation of it, has nothing to do with the value of studying nature and its creatures.

Just as Darwin was able to observe different species and deduce some (uncomfortable for him) more rational explanations than Lamarkism, humans can observe other primates and recognize more plasticity in human actions/choices than reductionist science or religious tradition considers possible.

Posted by: fauxreal | May 4, 2005 02:39 AM | #

razor:
It's not "evil baiting" to offer up NK and Cuba as examples of communist societies. But it might be a huge mistake. Sort of like offering up GWBush as an example of the world's most democratic person.

Posted by: citizen | May 4, 2005 02:39 AM | #

Timka:
I can live with your approach. Reality always trumps the theory - but reality is exactly that which theory is attempting to ascertain; so this is a process of constant adjustment as one learns more. True intellectual revolutions tend to conserve knowledge and elaborate it.

Posted by: citizen | May 4, 2005 02:47 AM | #

DeAnander
Far far off thread. I found old notes and I was dead wrong about Rich talking about Bonobos and so should have said nothing. "False consciousness" is part of the pitch that I did not remember, which is more to the point of the tangent on the need for and value of marxism. Rich slandered sons, not bonobos when she wrote, in Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Identity:

â€œSusan Cavin, in a rich and provocative, if highly speculative, dissertation, suggests that patriarchy becomes possible when the original female band, which includes children but ejects adolescent males, becomes invaded and outnumbered by males; that not patriarchal marriage, but the rape of the mother by the son, becomes the first act of male domination. The entering wedge, or leverage, which allows this to happen is not just a simple change in sex ratios; it is also the mother-child bond, manipulated by adolescent males in order to remain within the matrix past the age of exclusion. Maternal affection is used to establish male right of sexual access, which, however, must ever after be held by force (or thorugh control of consciousness) since the original deep adult bonding is that of woman for woman. I find this hypothesis extremely suggestive, since, one form of false consciousness which serves compulsory heterosexuality is the maintenance of a mother-son relationship between women and men,....."

The bonobo connection is not Rich's, it is that the bonobo is the only ape that fits this description: a strong mother/son primate bond, where adult males are not in control of the group, but, that doesn't make bonobos mother rapers.

Fauxreal.
The study of nature is a wonder open to all, that does not exclude study of the classics that should protect future generations from making Straussian mistakes. Whether plasticity is a fair conclusion on the evidence is iffier.

Posted by: razor | May 4, 2005 04:00 AM | #

i found it necessary to skip over much of the discussion above - i lack the background to appreciate what is being talked about - but i am reminded of a quote i've heard attributed to john kenneth galbraith (and i heard this so long ago that the androcentrism of the language was unremarkable at the time)

"under capitalism man exploits man - whereas under communism it's just the reverse"

Posted by: mistah charley | May 4, 2005 08:09 AM | #

In our memories, there has never been an "under communism" that is not under capitalism. When Marx analysed capital in a disciplined way, he was critiquing society not showing a positive theory of how to govern. Just as rocket science doesn't abolish gravity but works with it, communism doesn't abolish capital but works with it. Communists sometimes attempt to ameliorate capitalism - I consider Cuba an example in this way. But Marxist reasoning is nothing without capitalism. As history, USSR was simply capitalism with state ownership of the capital. Read any of their economic plans if you have the stomach. Capital/growth... capital/growth... capital/growth.

One point of the critique is that capital has its own "subjectivity," and capital (or, in a time under capital, "society") doesn't care about the human point of view.

An attentive person knows that JKGalbraith was foxily fooling himself. If he were more honest, he would have said:

Under capitalism, capitalists exploit man. Whereas under communism, communists do. Would he have actually argued that the party officials managed something that was not capital? No. So why should we?

Posted by: citizen | May 4, 2005 10:59 AM | #

> ... the thing I came for: the wreck and not the story of the wreck the thing itself and not the myth the drowned face always staring toward the sun the evidence of damage ... --Adrienne Rich

Like he said: We have the poets.

Posted by: slothrop | May 4, 2005 11:42 AM | #

This thread is getting mighty long and involved. Are we solving anything?

Posted by: rapt | May 4, 2005 12:04 PM | #

rapt

this is among the best threads, imo. In it, straussians are discovered (positivism, the relativist assertion of power, the assiduous mythology of law as the best it can be given the reality of social relations always encumbered by domination), and the others of strauss (the ones who believe in a moral basis of interaction, the perfectibility of humanity, realists who constantly guard against the intrusion of myth in the affairs of individuals, and who are arrogant to believe victims can make a better history than victors).

Posted by: slothrop | May 4, 2005 12:20 PM | #

careful about those solutions. we solved the enemy good in '45, but before we finished we

had become Shiva.

I'm aiming to understand things better. And if you and I actually do understand a little better some of the real causes of how things work, that's a *real* change.

Let me put it this way - Capitalism yearns to one ending and suppresses another:

BOOM! vs. yawn...

Either we blow each other up, or we all become more and more un-capitalists and the people at the top (managers of capital, no capitalists left) get so bad at playing the game that they lose track, and we introduce a new game for everyone to move on to. We're going to have to make ourselves pretty freaking clever to make this new attraction, so understanding more may be the only way to avoid "boom!"

The more we understand how to play brilliantly, and the more the badass capitalists are jealous, the closer we are to a new game, one with more room for, yes, love.

Both endings so improbable - but one of them is ours.

Posted by: citizen | May 4, 2005 12:50 PM | #

Slothrop:
the assiduous mythology of law as the best it can be given the reality of social relations always encumbered by domination
Now I get what you mean way back up there. Cool. Thanks.

Correction on my above post:
...the more the badass *un-capitalists (managers)* are jealous...

Posted by: citizen | May 4, 2005 12:55 PM | #

Razor- The issue is the assumptions away from the idea that early human societies were harems. Gorillas live in harems, and they are not as closely related to humans as are common chimps or bonobos. But harems have existed in human cultures, in certain conditions, and continue to exist, in spite of other options.

Common chimpanzees have less in common with humans than bonobos do. This makes some people uneasy, because it challenges the assumptions dominance and also the "humans developed as male bands of killers/warmakers" idea. In fact, however, evidence suggests that our earlier ancestors, australeopithicines, were prey, not predators, for large cats. The ability to figure out ways to herd animals off cliffs went a long way toward moving humans out of environments inhabited by those who would prey on them. Did humans move to the savannah to find other food sources, or to avoid being a food source? Or a combination of both?

Bonobos are interesting because they share more human-like traits than chimpanzees, such as more bipedalism, but also because they have sex when females are not ovulating. Common chimpanzees do not do this. Unlike (most) humans, bonobos live in groups that, basically, use indiscriminate orgies to ease social tensions (college years accepted.)

This does not mean humans came out of orgiastic ancestors. However, the fact that both humans and bonobos have sex for pleasure, not just for procreation, means that humans

also found uses for sex as a social "lubricant" and as a way to create emotional bonds.

So the plasticity is about the movement away from assumptions that have been based upon lack of knowledge and, again, ideological positions that were fostered by certain religions. Hunter-gatherer societies have been found that are both more egalitarian or less (when gathering was the primary source of food vs hunting). These bands have also demonstrated that people have long lived in groups that were formed in various ways.

Matrilineal societies are one way of dealing with male anxiety about parenthood, so that male uncles and cousins become the important male figures. Patrilineal societies found that it was useful to make women dependent or property in order to assure paternity. Maybe a history of modern civilization could be written from the perspective of male anxiety. (Engels seems to have had some things right, and some things wrong.)

All these societies have existed, continue to exist, and may exist into the future. This is plasticity. This is not determinism based upon some assumption of the "natural" order of things by looking at primates that are less like us than ones that we have only known about since the 1920s.

Posted by: fauxreal | May 4, 2005 12:57 PM | #

Rapt, quite right about the thread being awfully long. How about we start a new one under the heading of "Strauss vs. reality-based social science"? I'd be very happy to write up something trying to yank my attention back toward thinking in ways that counteract Straussian creations of new ignorances.

Let me see what I can slap together by, say, tomorrow? Or actually, I like slothrop's last summary as the framework for a new thread. We could just re-order the sentences a bit and go. Slothrop?

Posted by: citizen | May 4, 2005 01:01 PM | #

Slothrop, dude: what's real about "history is class struggle"? The critique of Marxism by the anarchists and later by Sartre and people like E.P. Thompson who was definitely out of the Marxist mainstream is essentially that it imposes a totalizing ideology that is prone to delusion and authoritarianism like all totalizing ideologies. (perhaps this is why Althusser and so many French Communist luminaries along with US stalinist hacks like Horowitz and the ex-trotskyites neo-cons found it so easy to switch to more profitable myths). Some of us are here for the wreck, not the story of the wreck (nice quote). The Marxist myth is now relegated to the backwaters and the myths of the Evangelicals, Straussians, Jihadis, and others rule the world. But to survive the wreck or even to enjoy the ride, we have to see it for what it is.

Posted by: citizen k | May 4, 2005 01:11 PM | #

@razor, imho you're reaching. what is "slanderous" about the mention of a text as *rich and provocative, if highly speculative*? Rich strongly emphasises the hypothetical nature of the "patriarchy starts as mother/son incest in hominid kin groups" theory. other people have other theories. to see this somehow as a "slander" on any contemporary members of the post-industrial nuclear family seems to be taking pre-history (and speculative theory) rather personally :-) did Freud "slander" all sons when he theorised the Oedipal complex? [I don't like the old Viennese bastard one bit, but even I wouldn't say that about him]...

as to the infantilisation of privilege -- whether it be the infantilisation of men who don't feel a need to know how to cook, clean, or pick up after themselves 'cos they have a traditional Wifey, or the infantilisation of rich people ditto because they have a maid and butler, that hardly seems controversial. pseudo-parenting relationships where the person with less power/money is coerced or structurally situated as a faux-Mommy to the more privileged person are quite typical in human society -- from "Mammy" on the plantation to Bertie Wooster's Jeeves, to the old-fashioned office secretary who's supposed to straighten the boss' tie and keep track of his birthday list for him. people with a bit of privilege are always wanting to have their Mommy back in a controllable, docile form. Rich may have expressed this in somewhat hifalutin language but it's hardly rocket science; and the connection with male sexual prerogative is hardly far fetched -- after all, what is the excuse commonly made for male sexual predation and misbehaviour? "**Boys** will be **boys**" -- more infantilisation and shrugging off adult responsibility.

afaik there is a continuous tradition of matrilineal macaques in Japan -- primatologists studying ranking behaviour in their bands were fascinated to find out that the macaques inherited social standing from their mothers.

Posted by: DeAnander | May 4, 2005 01:25 PM | #

Ahemm - if someone could please summarize the above in a few hundred words I`ll be happy to open a new thread on this very interesting item :-||.

Mailto: MoonofA-at-aol.com

Posted by: b | May 4, 2005 01:26 PM | #

Brother k!
I agree that Marxian thought has to leave behind part of the class struggle idea, for reasons I've hinted at above. As long as there is a capitalist class, it will rule - very simple - even if it has to call itself a dictatorship of the proletariat to do so. Captal is the trickster coyote, and even when you kill off that damn coyote he comes back for another story. So, sure, I agree not to stand Hegel on his head anymore, not to totalize falsely. I agree not to think that the point of philosophy is to change the world - but rather to understand it and work *with* it.

Does it work for you if I concede that Marx should have learned to surf in his spare afternoons off between feeding his kids when he could and researching at the library? Well, Marx *is* learning to surf.

Realist social science (brought to you first by KMarx) helps us see that the logics of capital and old Father Time are reducing the population of capitalists. Trust funds, corporations, etc., the time is in view when no one will directly control his wealth. I mean, who the hell who's 'anyone' actually lives in those off shore bank countries?
The funny thing that happens when you put all those tax saving legal baffles between you and your wealth is that you lose control.

And realist social science can actually teach us something about where the logic of capitalism will come from as it comes more and more entirely 'over the heads' of any individual empirically acting in the world. And in our world, more and more people are getting less and less to say about the rules that control their capital, and so their time. No?

And why is that? To get more money for those who can arbitrage the rules. So, do you seriously mean to say that class struggle is not history? Then how did my country go from being a population of farmers who could feed themselves without cash, to a country populated almost entirely by laborers, including more and more millionaire laborers who can't afford to lose their paychecks for a year? That's some serious historical change. No?

Posted by: citizen | May 4, 2005 02:03 PM | #

Yikes

Posted by: razor | May 4, 2005 02:58 PM | #

b

seems the last post of slothrop would be a good beginning

tho deep in my heart i think neither slothrop or i need to defend critical marxism - it does that well enough itself but i find the bibliographies people offer a real help - generally

rapt i do not think the thread is as oblique as it seems - the lines are quite clear & there seems to me to be interaction even if it is a little sensitive

Posted by: remembereringgiap | May 4, 2005 03:05 PM | #

Not sure about the appropriation of Nietzsche by Strauss, but I'd imagine something like Rand: capitalism as an expression of will to power, as a justification for goal oriented behavior, "instrumental-purposive rationality," the heroic capitalist who violates the second imperative as a matter of business.

Now, that's *vulgar* fuckover of our man ("ours," comrades):

> "The old habit, however, of associating a goal with every event ... is so powerful that it requires an effort for a thinker not to fall into thinking of the very aimlessness of the world as intended. This notion-that the world intentionally avoids a goal. . .-must occur to all those who would like to force on the world the capacity for eternal novelty. ... The world, as force, may not be thought of as unlimited, for it cannot be so thought of. . . . Thus-the world also lacks the capacity for eternal novelty."
>
> We have created the weightiest thought-now let us create the being for whom it is light and pleasing!" --Nietzsche

Posted by: slothrop | May 4, 2005 05:34 PM | #

citizen k

WRT history as class struggle, it is true the historical narrative of this struggle is translated by ideology. For example, Marx recognized this during the Paris commune and aftermath:

> "In the ideas of the proletarians.... who confused the finance aristocracy with the bourgeoisie in general; in the imagination of good old republicans, who denied the very existence of classes or, at most, admitted them as a result of the constitutional monarchy; in the hypocritical phrases of the segments of the bourgeoisie up till now excluded from power-in all these, the rule of the bourgeoisie was abolished with the introduction of the republic. All the

> royalists were transformed into republicans, and all the millionaires of Paris into workers. The phrase which corresponded to this imagined liquidation of class relations was fraternite." Karl Marx

Put another way: we may choose to ignore history, but history will not ignore us.

Posted by: slothrop | May 4, 2005 06:08 PM | #

Slothrop: In plain language, you say there is class struggle and delusion. But this is exactly what I reject. The french peasants won substantial and lasting gains from the French Revolution and the mass of French workers live extraordinarily well compared with how the same group lived at the start of the 1900s despite the continued rule of the capitalists. Marx often veers towards a "ha ha, you fools, don't understand what is really going on" mechanical view of social change with a dismissal of reformism despite the actual effects on the lives of humans. Of course, the women's movement in the US and the civil rights movement were pulled and pushed by class differences, but they changed lives in ways that cut accross class lines as well. Of course the liberation struggle in South Africa brought a class of black bureaucrats and managers above a huge proletariat that remains impoverished and exploited. But while a European academic may dismiss the change of not having to carry around a passbook and be called kaffir as mere superstructure, that's a shallow dismissal.

Posted by: citizen k | May 4, 2005 07:58 PM | #

Brother citizen. Smart words. Surf more, totalize less.
One of the distinctive characteristics of our time is this rise of commerce in the most elaborated abstractions and of an all powerful managerial class that as Bernie Ebbers put is "know[s] nothing about technology and finance". Time to think about this discussion a bit.

Posted by: citizen k | May 5, 2005 09:04 AM | #

citizen k:

> The french peasants won substantial and lasting gains from the French Revolution and the mass of French workers live extraordinarily well compared with how the same group lived at the start of the 1900s despite the continued rule of the capitalists.

Me (citizen) above:

> go from being a population of farmers who could feed themselves without cash, to a country populated almost entirely by laborers, including more and more millionaire laborers who can't afford to lose their paychecks for a year

These both seem to be solid empirical data, and I take it they are both true. And I am also tempted toward's citizen k's description that Marxist critique views social change 'mechanically'. But - I credit Marxian critique with the same insight used by Foucault, namely that power is not primarily a matter of repression, but also of positively producing and reproducing living activity. So yes, capitalism produces lots of goods, including pretty much everything that we approve in the world. But this should not come as a surprise - Marxism critiques all of this world, considering both the desirable and the undesirable.

My guide in this is Moishe Postone's *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: a*

reinterpretation of Marx's critical theory. If pressed for time, read his article in *Historical Materialism 12.3*, "Critique and Historical Transformation". The whole issue is devoted to his book, so there are people critiquing his so called abandonment of class struggle, etc. but I have not read those yet. Postone reads the *Grundrisse* intensely, something I have yet to attempt, so I comment as a novice.

If Marxist critique is all about labor, then let's say that Postone's critique is all about time, and how the capitalist mathematics of time is concerned with how time makes capital (time is money). To a capitalist, it may be all about the money, but in reality exchange is done for both the profits and for an eventual use - the commodity form. So every advance in social domination (via abstract labor) is also an increase in use values. So yes, citizen k, the world must grow wealthier in "goods" in order for social domination to proceed via the routes of abstract time, abstract labor, and **abstract social domination.**

Abstract social domination - happens in a world where the primary form of wealth is abstract (this scarcely needs introducing: who among us does not bank, and more importantly fret endlessly, in a world of sheer numbers which, despite their near irreality, ensure our wealth). Because Postone works on these lines, he does not focus on forms of distribution in capitalism, his critique differs from this tradition with which citizen k engages.

> **Within the framework of this reading, the basic categories of Marx's critique not only delineate a mode of exploitation. They are also temporally dynamic categories that seek to grasp modern capitalist society as a mode of social life characterised by quasi-objective forms of domination (commodity, capital) that underlie an intrinsic historical dynamic. This dialectical dynamic is a socially-constituted historically-specific core feature of capitalism, *one that gives rise to, and, at the same time, constrains the possibility of a postcapitalist, emancipated form of life.* It is grounded, ultimately, in a form of wealth specific to capitalism, namely value, that is at the same time, a form of social mediation, which Marx distinguishes sharply from what he terms material wealth.**

Postone is working from knowledge of what has actually been happening under capitalism in our lifetimes, and he has re-examined Marx to see how it is that wealth and social domination intertwine, and his take on Marx provides a way to know the existence of general structural constraints on political, social, and economic decisions, such as those that brought down the USSR. In Postone's words:

> **A position that grounds such historical patterns in the categories of Marx's critique (commodity, capital) does not, then, regard such patterns affirmatively, but takes their existence as a manifestation of heteronomy.**

Nietschze would have just said "slavery". Postone is a social scientist, so he throws no bombs, but instead says this: "*attempts to rescue human agency that posit historical contingency abstractly and transhistorically, bracket and veil the existence of historically specific structures of domination. They are thereby, ironically, profoundly disempowering.*

I hear him saying - if you follow Strauss and those other slavers into their trap of saying that ancient Greeks read Plato etc. as we do, you demoralize and disarm

yourself. Study Marx. The rules have changed. Wealth does not equal freedom.

Posted by: citizen | May 5, 2005 10:50 AM | #

Sorry about the unclosed tag. Somehow I didn't see it in preview.

Posted by: citizen | May 5, 2005 10:52 AM | #

citizen

when I read citizen k's bold attempt to win the last word, the rejection of class conflict is justified by mr. k in a familiar tautology of logic:

a) the positive account of 1st world workers suggests an accomplishment of capital, because

b) workers are no longer proletarians, but demonstrate intergenerational income mobility, therefore,

c) class conflict cannot, seldom if ever, exists, because workers no longer act in accord with a consciousness of class conflict

Another way of restating the same logic is via Timka above, who notes the constitutiveness of culture and law in the transformation of life. That is, persons make law which is reproduced culturally and reflexively ("structurated" as some sociologists put it), so that the social relations appear natural and "pragmatic" as Timka would say.

There are two ways to look at this process of structuration: as reification/myth, or as a positive account of the "pragmatic" outcomes of structuration.

What citizen k accomplishes is the second assessment: there is no real class conflict, because among workers, the fables of capitalist "progress," "the American Dream," are constantly reproduced by law and culture, and therefore obviate the reality of class conflict.

This is nothing more than postivistic vindication of inequality. Note: the hip postmodern, cultural studies, ethnographic research, not to mention economics--all too often worship, as citizen k apparently does, the false consciousness (what else do we call it?) of consumerist liberty, this constant structuration of power assuring decisive inequality and pain.

So, citizen, I think you give k too much credit. I think he has swallowed the bait of the mystification offered of freedom offered by the "chaos of production" in which the seeming arbitrariness of the allocation of resources seems to give us all our freedom to choose.

Citizen, you would have done better to simply remind k the excellent progress won by French workers was made largely possible by colonialist exploition and murder--that the spectacle of fraternite given its luster by the sweat of the colonies.

Posted by: slothrop | May 5, 2005 11:37 AM | #

Slothrop: what is your alternative vision? Let us take as given that Marx is a supreme critic of capitalism, that from the point of view of his time he was pretty damn good at it. Now, what is to be done? What is the alternative vision that we should be working towards?

Posted by: Colman | May 5, 2005 11:53 AM | #

colman

Planned production, of course.

Read deanander's voluminous posts on ecology. It's pretty obvious humans must abandon capitalist resource appropriation as a matter of survival. If, for no other reason.

Posted by: slothrop | May 5, 2005 11:57 AM | #

alabama

I was only trying to imagine what Strauss himself might have posted on this particular thread.

You don't have to look any further than timka, razor, citizen k. Though, what is lacking obviously in razor's posts, and substantially in citizen k's posts, is the acknowledgment of the subterfuge of capitalist progress, of this progress as a ruse to keep all the happy people happy.

Posted by: slothrop | May 5, 2005 12:08 PM | #

Planned by whom?

Posted by: Colman | May 5, 2005 12:11 PM | #

Colman

By whom?

By me.

Deanander and others no far more than I do about the practice of "sustainability." As I've said before, autochthonous, localized production, outlined by Murray Bookchin and others seems a good blueprint.

Added to this is the socialization of the production of telecoms, energy, transportation, medicine, utilities in general.

Posted by: slothrop | May 5, 2005 12:22 PM | #

Also realize some of my comments seem mean, arrogant. I respect the posts here by citizen k, etc. as inspiring.

just puttin mustard on the bitch, you know.

Posted by: slothrop | May 5, 2005 12:24 PM | #

Slothrop, planned production, but it could not work in the infamous sense tried in the USSR or PRC.

The aristocratic (bolshevist, Straussian, whatever) attempts to judge the good from their limited perspective has been failing quite spectacularly for at least several centuries now. This I see as one of the reasons capitalism could get going so strongly. So planned production could not be elitist AND work, especially in its process of knowing "what time it is."

But the disaster of so-called laissez faire demands planning. So, perhaps we are seeing the rudiments of a distributed knowledge and decision process coming into being. Whatever, the positive alternative demanded by Colman b>cannot come into being because some bolshie Straussian (or platonic virtuoso) figures out a great idea that will work. So it is no use demanding a dictatorship.

What can work is trial and error, and critique and trial and error.... you know, the scientific method. Only this is a social problem, so the whole society is the scientist.

Society-the-scientist relies on good critique from we individuals. If we articulate our critique well, others may take up the thought as their own. When enough do, then the society can begin to sustain the thought socially, to sustain the good method that has been tried to test the thought, and so to solve the problem, socially. That is my solution for you Colman - more poetry. Or rather - Enlightenment.

About my credit accorded to citizen k: I agree that the progress for French wealth in the lower classes, for example, was in many ways stolen from elsewhere. But I also mean to say that capitalism does produce *more wealth*. The problem is that it is a modern form of wealth, and one that induces (to use language loosely) slavery. I am interested also in the ways that that French wealth is also French insecurity and French subordination to capital, subordination to an inhumane world. We are looking at Midas's bad wealth.

Posted by: citizen | May 5, 2005 12:31 PM | #

Actually, I think the Buddhists have best articulated this key step I am on about in trying to articulate a solution:
Right Vision

The Straussians are just trying to pervert this good idea. "Straussverts" Strauss had such a boner for ignorance. Argh... my mind reels trying to confront his corruption.

Posted by: citizen | May 5, 2005 12:42 PM | #

So what you're saying is that you have no clue what we should do, just that you don't like what we're doing? Great. Well, you won't mind if the experiment we try is using the regulated market where appropriate, trying to balance individual property rights against the requirements of fairness.

As for planned production, if someone has a method that won't turn into an aristocracy or feudalism almost immediately, I'd be interested in hearing it.

Posted by: Colman | May 5, 2005 12:46 PM | #

colman

I said: about agriculture/energy, waste management, etc. others here know more than me. I'm in the middle of reading stuff suggested by some of our comrades.

Also, please note: I said socialization of industries crucial to material reproduction. I'll also add what I've mentioned elsewher: these crucial industries are also ones demonstrating increasing returns to scale--these should be centrally planned. Healthcare is weird case: elasticity whacked aqnd these resources require rationing which no "free" market can

accomplish.

These are specific solutions, in outline form, colman.

Posted by: slothrop | May 5, 2005 12:56 PM | #

> As I've said before, autochthonous, localized production, outlined by Murray Bookchin and others seems a good blueprint.

I've always wondered: how does concentrating the power locally prevent locals from forming an aristocracy? What prevents the rise of a local boss?

Posted by: Colman | May 5, 2005 12:57 PM | #

Colman - don't be an ass. I said scientific method, which involves respecting the data, but also seeking to go beyond it.

The "regulated market" is not regulated.

Faith in the markets is a big P.T. Barnum target we paint on the whole world to forget what we meant when aimed to be "citizens." Iraqis are now on the pointy end of that delusion-stick. Poetry and scientific retroduction are two different words for looking *actively* for a better explanation than this one that is taking us appreciably close rot mutual annihilation. Poetry is not "no clue", it is getting a clue.

The experiment is not working. Why do you profess satisfaction?

Posted by: citizen | May 5, 2005 01:03 PM | #

Slothrop: Your deduction that lack of belief in "history is class conflict" means that I am a Straussian stooge who believes there is no such thing as class conflict, illustrates the shortcoming of your analytical methodology quite comprehensively. My basic critique of Marxianism, is that like Straussianism and Opus Dei Catholicism it defines a totalizing ideology interpreted by an elite who must not be questioned. Of course, since you approvingly refer to Bookchin and Rich, I confess that I have similarly typecast you wrongly.

In any case - happily offer the last word to others and return to trying to earn some money.

Later.

Posted by: citizen k | May 5, 2005 01:19 PM | #

back to basics

a) communist societies have never existed except perhaps in humanity's nascence

b) communist moments have existed for very short periods of time - the commune of paris - 1917 -1919 in russia , in the yenan period in china especially during the anti japanese war, it existed for 5 minutes in hungary, another 10 minutes in certain german towns after the great war,

c) socialism in different form has existed but really much closer to social democracy with an elite

d) cuba, as a society has really tried, valiantly before the tyranny of u s capital & they have

made remarkable progress in education & health & race relations that would shame its larger neighbour & indeed the whole of latin america but it is fighting a losing war surrounded as it is by meance & threat

e) i don't know what north korea is but it is in part an entire construction of american foreign policy - it certainly has very little to do with communism

f) the vienamese are far closer to social democracies than a closed mind would except

g) one german jew does not make another german jew. marx is not strauss is not benjamin

h) razor, timka & citizen k have expressed profound ignorance in knowledge of the old man's text & that much is proven by what they have written here

i) they conflate so many things that i end up being lost in a meaning that is itself without much meaning

j) the ideas of srauss have a particular but concrete history - the use of strauss is another history but both tendencies are clearly anti democratic, gnostic, misanthropic & are open to use by tyranny more than they are by 'open' societies

k) america is not now an 'open' society so the thoughts of strauss & his children & heirs in american conservatism want a totalitarian state - effectively

l) to speak as some do here as if legal theory, as if laws & justice had a meaning in the current context is baffling when it is not a bad joke

m) some here speak as if common law came to us from the vagina of mother mary - pure & unaffected by interests or ideology & that ever since it has existed in an uncontaminated state waiting only for a few learned fellows from the bar or from the university to enact it

n) some here describe this straussian moment as if it is just that but everything from the the cod war onwards would tell us that that thinking is integrated whole into the american body politic

o) it is a long life for some & i would suggest that the strauss's, the friedmans, the schmitt's need to be read because they provide ample proof of their own corruption & vanity. it is not an excuse that they wrote well. some of the more thoughtful thinking in philosophy is necessarily speculative & sometimes oblique & therefore clumsy. haberas for example is a thoughtful & clumsy writer, so is baudrillard for example, virrilio yet another

p) as i have posted before such damage has been done to the legislative & judicial appareil that it requires revolutionary change even within its own terms

q) as citizen has pointed out some of the most important ideas of our time have come from poets - adonis from syria/lebanon, elytis, cavafy & ritsos from greece, darwich from occupied palestine, many pets from iraq, nazim hikmet from turkey rene char from france, erich fried from germany, taduesz rocewicz from poland, & of course my papa valdimir vlamirovich mayakovsky

r) that poetry has elucidated our world in a clearer, more criticial & more instinctual way than the vagaries of legal theory

one day the poor & the oppressed will express & articulate & practice their justice & i think

it will far way from the meditations of razor, of citizen k & of timka

Posted by: remembereringgiap | May 5, 2005 01:48 PM | #

citizen k

slothrop is not calling you that(a straussian stooge) & you know it - this is a spirited debate & it seems to me that you are the one doing the totalising

i think, put simply your critique & that of razors infers a world that does not exist. perhaps, in the same way that i feel communism has not existed - marxism is transforming, contradictory & vital & necessarily speculative

Posted by: remembereringgiap | May 5, 2005 01:56 PM | #

Call it a matter of "faith" on my part, slothrop (@12:08 PM), but I hold to the absolute singularity of a person, and certainly of an author--any author. Strauss is never to be confused with his readers--which is not to say that his work lacks responsibility for the way it's read. I know of no place, for example, where he spells out his own plan for a good society, or a strategy for founding one, and yet it's hard to read him without being tempted, as it were, to "fill in the blanks". And I know of no place where he discourages us from doing so. My own tendency is to read him for his positive assertions. He seems to regard the Hebrew Bible as the site of Absolute Truth, for example, and to evaluate *everyone* in terms of their proximity to this site. It's a defining singularity of his thought, and has to affect the take of any "Straussian"--especially those who can't be bothered to read him, and might even think they disagree with him.

Posted by: alabama | May 5, 2005 01:58 PM | #

Thanks for that slothrop: if you answered that before I either missed or failed to understand it.

Posted by: Colman | May 5, 2005 02:00 PM | #

citizen k

like I say, much respect for your posts here, and Timka too.

There is a difference between "totalizing" and "social totality." The notion of class-conflict is intended to capture in an understandable way social totality. But, i agree "totalizing ideology" is always to be avoided, and the notion of class conflict seems malleable enough to avoid "totalizing."

I suppose to characterize our misapprehensions of each other: you seemed to needlessly "reduce" class conflict as plausible description of social pathology, while I did the reverse for you. And in fact, neither is really the case.

And, for me at least, the limited form of blog fora provokes tendetiousness, which I accuse myself.

Posted by: slothrop | May 5, 2005 02:04 PM | #

alabama

well, you are honored as the catalyst for this monstrous, informative thread, and w/out your scolding, would never have read strauss.

Posted by: slothrop | May 5, 2005 02:07 PM | #

alabama

here is where disagree. tho i think it is necessary to read leo strauss, which i have - i believe him to be a worthless thinker especially his commentaries

there is no more magisterial work on who & what what we are - than the nooks & crannies of walter benjamin's das passagen werk - uhrkmp verlag, frankfurt am main, 1982, there is a magnificent translation in french by les edition du cerf, 1989

benjamin rest perhaps one of the few german intellectuals of that time whose work i trust completely & without reserve

Posted by: remembereringgiap | May 5, 2005 02:09 PM | #

> Colman - don't be an ass.

I wasn't being an ass. I was summarising what you said. Poetry is great, but not a reliable guide to action as a rule.

> The "regulated market" is not regulated.
>
> Faith in the markets is a big P.T. Barnum target we paint on the whole world to forget what we meant when aimed to be "citizens." Iraqis are now on the pointy end of that delusion-stick.

Now who's being an ass? I didn't say I had faith in the markets nor that I believed that they were currently regulated. I said to use the markets for the stuff they're good at, not have faith in them.

> The experiment is not working. Why do you profess satisfaction?

I don't. I suggested we should try that experiment: it no more exists in most of the world than communism does.

Posted by: Colman | May 5, 2005 02:09 PM | #

"Though, what is lacking obviously in razor's posts, and substantially in citizen k's posts, is the acknowledgment of the subterfuge of capitalist progress, of this progress as a ruse to keep all the happy people happy."

I communicated after all! I am in fact for the ruses that keep all the happy people happy if that is what the happy people want and the alternative is coercion by marxians who can't make a sale otherwise.

Stand Marx on his head for goodness sake. The implicit assumption that some have the truth because Marxian memes (direct descendants of the antagonistic competitor to the Anglo American line, the post Kantian German comprehensive philosophy line, that also includes Straussians, and many neo cons) have colonized their brains to the exclusion of contradicting information from one and a half centuries of updates, is just another confirmation of what needs no more confirming. In some of us those marxian memes lost the competition for brain space.

In the year 2005, continuing to insist that others must subscribe to an untestable philosophy and psudeo science that explains away all the results, or, be ruled ignorant and unenlightened! Marx would be ashamed.

The pertinent question is who represents the subset and who the superset of mortal knowledge. The marxians have been crushed in the Go game, and are conclusively revealed a distinct subset.

Marxism only matters at the moment because it makes the hard source questions immeasurably harder to pursue at a time source questions are critical to counter psudo conservative nonsense. Once someone tries to raise those source questions in good faith, the marxist meme zombies attack. They will not take human reality for an answer, and may still have the power to block critical progress by tainting all they touch with the repuganant history of marxism in action. And, if they were what they claim to be, this would not be the case, because a marxian "science" would not require this fanatic allegiance to its own jargon and history, but could easily adapt because science doesn't depend on or need any particlar jargon and history.

Posted by: razor | May 5, 2005 02:14 PM | #

> And, for me at least, the limited form of blog fora provokes tendetiousness, which I accuse myself.

I don't know how you could have reached that conclusion.

Posted by: Colman | May 5, 2005 02:18 PM | #

razor

are you trying to read ayn rand through john rawls while listening to aerosmith

or are you some great common law advocate defending the poor & oppressed at a moments notice

or are you a defender of the tradition as old as ancient greece of hiding your elitism behind a subterfuge of 'openness' to human interaction, whicha paranthetically - i do not witness at all in yor posts

the law is the law is the law
a criminal class is a criminal class is a criminal class

gladly, the interests of empire are safe in your hands - & the old family from odessa will be glad that you have transfromed pogrom into programme

Posted by: remembereringgiap | May 5, 2005 02:24 PM | #

colman

I mean, the comments, mine also, are unreliably truncated and sometimes too aphoristic.

It's a difficult, fragile discourse, but valuable nevertheless.

Posted by: slothrop | May 5, 2005 02:24 PM | #

And sometimes attempts at humor get utterly lost.

Posted by: Colman | May 5, 2005 02:27 PM | #

science and poetry

each of these is only healthy and nourishing when it respects the reality it works on.

citizen k:

> My basic critique of Marxianism, is that like Straussianism and Opus Dei Catholicism it defines a totalizing ideology interpreted by an elite who must not be questioned.

Yes, if you are reading theorists who speak this way, then by all means object. But Marx's scientific works and notes do not advocate this. I am familiar with trickster "Marxists" who have spoken this way, but I am also familar with trickster "democrats" (like Strauss). We have to be wise as well as clever.

The very good reason to study Marxist social science is that it respects the reality of the world. Unlike Strauss, Marx recommends that we try to discipline our inquiries with terms of art that constantly remind social scientists that if we throw sand into the wind (into the reality of how society works now) it keeps blowing and we end up blinded. That is one reason to use a Marxist vocabulary, because it points to social reality better than can old aristocratic theories of individual virtue. Strauss foxily misreads an entire corpus of texts to obscure the reality of social causes. But Strauss's emperor is completely stark naked. The proper response when someone points out that the emperor is naked is not to say, "Yes, but how will **you** clothe him?"

The mess of (not) accounting America's billions of tax dollars spent in Iraq on flattening Falloojah and painting a few hundred schools is a revolting performance art burlesque of what happens more subtly in Anglo-American free markets. It is a demented warning of what we will all get if we continue to say "sure!" to so called free markets in everything. The house searches, check points, and faux trials are our raving mad society desperately trying to warn us how well we can expect things to go of we rely on "trying to balance property rights and fairness."

The free market is a naked lie. How much does it cost to maintain a "free market"? An actually free society would know the answer; it would plan for it.

The challenge slothrop has posed is a sensible one for an actually liberated people: a society that claims to be free should plan to produce that freedom and track how well it's doing, not just hope for it. No?

Posted by: citizen | May 5, 2005 03:04 PM | #

> The proper response when someone points out that the emperor is naked is not to say, "Yes, but how will you clothe him?"

What is the proper response? To spout fountains of jargon that can only be understood by the properly initiated elite?

The current problem have nothing whatsoever to do with free markets. The current problem is a philosophy, a world view, that denies half of human nature. We are driven both by a concern for ourselves and a concern for our comrades and fairness.

The prevailing Anglo-Saxon world-view denies the second part of that. It denies the golden rule, grasping at whatever justifications it can: Strauss, social darwinism, welfare theorems, whatever.

It does not matter if that world-view expresses itself through feudalism, central planning or free markets. It will yield disaster.

Economics should be realm for engineering, not ideologies. Markets are neither moral or immoral. It's how we use markets that has moral content. We should use markets when appropriate, socialisation when appropriate. Now I've started channeling Adam Smith.

Posted by: Colman | May 5, 2005 03:20 PM | #

Admittedly, I have pushed "production" to include other goods than th emore concrete ones I expect slothrop meant when he wrote that.

razor:
science doesn't depend on or need any particlar jargon and history.
Ummmmm, do you know any physicists?
Equally, what would you say if I told you that Marxian social science is a historical science? That data is history in all fields of science, including social science?

The pertinent question is who represents the subset and who the superset of mortal knowledge. The marxians have been crushed in the Go game, and are conclusively revealed a distinct subset.
Am I free to take from this that you will transfer your allegiance to whomever wins?

Colman:
Now who's being an ass?
Sure, I'll 'fess. It's all bump and grind. Peace (and disagreement).

Posted by: citizen | May 5, 2005 03:25 PM | #

What is the proper response? To spout fountains of jargon that can only be understood by the properly initiated elite?
When working in a disciplined and demanding environment, yes, precise terminology that communicates specific things to the initiated is key. Among others, football players, engineers, musicians, draftsmen, martial artists, and Marxists share this need to think and communicate expertly.

And yet we can also speak more loosely. I think in the post to which you reply I was making all my words generally available for this audience. But you're right, I did not answer the question about what would be an appropriate Marxist response. The answer:

laugh.

hard.

Posted by: citizen | May 5, 2005 03:34 PM | #

There are two kinds of people: those that split everything in two categories and those that don't...

I'd be interested to know what our resident marxists think of what has happened in Russia

in the past 15 years. To me, it is pure capitalism as understood by marxists (which they all were to some extent). It looks disturbingly similar to Randism or whatever it's called (objectivism?)

I'm lost in all the ism's you're all discussing - but nothing good has ever come of any "-ism"

Posted by: JÃ©rÃ´me | May 5, 2005 03:55 PM | #

I see a rift in this thread that can't be bridged, one has to acknowledged if the thread is to lead anywhere. Any honest scholar is at once a "man of the street," who walks and talks with other people on the street, and a technical climber, who, on a technical climb, is doing something different from walking and talking on the street. There's plenty of pathos and comedy in this state of affairs, and it all has to be processed by each and every honest scholar for himself or herself. Some do it well, and some don't do it very well at all. Benjamin certainly tried to do it well, but he also believed that technical climbers had an overriding, and prior, obligation to his fellow climbers: " *An author who teaches writers nothing, teaches no one* ". This sentence comes at the conclusion of *The Author as Producer* , a Marxist essay if ever there was one. The italics are his own, it's the only italicized sentence in the essay.

Posted by: alabama | May 5, 2005 04:10 PM | #

"one that has to be acknowledged". I don't proof-read very well.

Posted by: alabama | May 5, 2005 04:11 PM | #

"Am I free to take from this that you will transfer your allegiance to whomever wins?"

You are kidding, right? Or do you believe in an omniescient mortal? I suggest, instead of Marx, version 1,231.05, a basic summary of population biology, the predator prey race, and immunology. This would ward off the superstition that there is A person out there with THE answer, by injecting the reality of statistics and populations and enviromental change into the mix, and so avoid rhetorical questions that are far wide of the mark. I do not belong to the church of comprehensive philosophy. I belong to the church of DNA.

As to scientific language, any physicist worth his salt can drop the jargon and still stick to the concepts. Call pi cake - who cares? The Airbus Whale flies or it does not. A trait of scientific language is that it is tested against indifferent data. A scientest who engaged in tricks like false consciousness to explain away, for example, continental drift, might even lose tenure. Marxism is a closed system for those who choose to make it so and those who insist on its hegemony, do. Get on the right side of history by dropping the labels.

Posted by: razor | May 5, 2005 04:13 PM | #

"fellow technical climbers". Maybe I don't proof-read at all.

Posted by: alabama | May 5, 2005 04:15 PM | #

razor

dear dear dear

Posted by: remembereringgiap | May 5, 2005 04:18 PM | #

coercion by marxians who can't make a sale otherwise kinda like Wal*Mart or Halliburton, eh? coercive marketing didn't start with marxism nor does it end there.

razor has raised an important point (at last) however, among the usual persiflage: *They will not take human reality for an answer, and may still have the power to block critical progress by tainting all they touch with the repuganant history of marxism in action.* the issue of Taint is one I've been wanting to discuss for some time, as it is the central argument of the Red-baiters. the colossal failures of the Soviet system, and the authoritarian brutality of its enforcement mechanisms, are pointed to as irrevocably "tainting" the discourse under whose banner they were committed.

if this argument of Taint is supportable then it leaves us moderns in a quandary. for there is no actually-existing ideology or religion -- including neoliberalism and capitalism -- which is not tainted with the death and suffering of large numbers of our kind. if we are to regard Soviet central planning as tarred forever with the brush of forced relocations, the Gulags, Lysenkoism and the other sins of the USSR -- then how are we not to regard mercantile capitalism as stained forever with the blood of indigenous millions who died and were enslaved to stoke Europe's early "free" markets with specie and raw materials? how shall we ignore the intimate connection between the slave trade and the commodities markets and the fortunes of Lloyd's of London? is there a family or corporate fortune on this planet that is not tainted with ancestral or contemporary crime? not rooted in land theft, war crimes, child labour, fraud, embezzlement, and all the rest?

shall we conveniently forget the tortures and murders committed by "friendly" dictators who enabled corporate profiteering, and remember only the crimes of those committed to centralised economic planning and state-owned enterprise? that is selective memory indeed.

and the struggle over Taint goes further and deeper.

is the Torah and all of Judaism tainted by the ideology of Zionism and the occupation of Palestine? is Christianity *per se* tainted by the Magdalene Institutions, the extirpation of indigenous cultures, languages and religions worldwide, by the burning of heretics and witches, by the paedophilia scandals, by the antics of the Robertsons and the Swaggarts? at what point can we separate ideology, dogma or theory from its real-world instantiation?

this argument smouldered on the papal election thread, as we argued over the balance sheet for the Catholic Church: has it done more harm than good, *in toto*? and if it has done more harm, is this because its dogma or belief system is inherently productive of harm, or because it was "mis-implemented" by corrupt human beings? does it belong on that proverbial "trash heap of history" where we are so eager to fling ideas we don't care for?

Strauss managed to make himself believe that rightwing totalitarianism was not tainted *per se* by the Nazi atrocities, even as he fled for his life. he still thought that in theory, centralised one-party authoritarianism (elite rule) was a nifty idea. well, at least he stuck to his principles :-) but it is hard for me to read Nazi political theory, or Straussian admiration for authoritarian rule, without the sense that these are ideologies inherently productive of harm: they explicitly propose an agenda of repression enforced by secrecy and violence.

but so does a business enterprise, if it can get away with it :-) secrecy (concealing information from customers and public, falsifying test results and financial reports, suppressing innovation), repression (breaking strikes by the use of armed thugs, spying on employees at leisure, invasive drug testing, keystroke monitoring), and violence (usually

against indigenes in areas designated for resource-stripping or poor people in areas designated for waste and toxics dumping) are commonplace in corporate practise -- and are in fact required by the business model that acknowledges no goal other than maximising shareholder return. the ideology of growth and monetary profit inherently implies these things. does this then taint the ideology of "free markets" which proposes a lack of any check and balance mechanism on corporate power? many would say so.

others would say that the theory of markets is simply being "mis-implemented" by corrupt human beings, much as the theory of communism was mis-implemented by corrupt human beings. or in other words, a lot of things sound good in theory, but given that they will be implemented by human beings who are corruptible, does even a good theory guarantee good results? the NT has some pretty good theory in it -- tolerance, mutual charity, compassion, and all the rest -- and yet the people who are waving it about the most loudly at present display few of its virtues.

in sum I think the argument of Taint as applied to an entire direction of thought, belief, or scholarship is a fairly weak one, since it can be applied in almost any direction with equal force. control freaks and thieves have operated under every flag from the cross of st G to the stars and stripes to the hammer and sickle.

I'm about to agree with Colman (quick, someone, call the *National Enquirer*!) but will do so separately and later. lunch break over.

Posted by: DeAnander | May 5, 2005 04:35 PM | #

I do not belong to the church of comprehensive philosophy. I belong to the church of DNA. razor 4:13

dear dear dear

Posted by: remembereringgiap | May 5, 2005 04:42 PM | #

nothing good has ever come of any "-ism"
how about activism and optimism? :)

Posted by: b real | May 5, 2005 04:52 PM | #

Look, I'll work intellectually with anyone who believes that social relations are at bottom, real, whatever vocabulary they use. It is not the specific set of terms that lets me trust someone, it is whether or not they agree to regard the way they treat me and other human beings as something more than an amusing story, a fascinating case. Durkheim provides an influential account of social relations, but he thinks the social object only exist as a social collective. I am effaced and straitjacketed as an individual - so why trust this? With Weber the social exists as regulative ideas, and my body is erased from the picture (so I get a whiff of asceticism and murder). Marx, refreshingly, explains my relations to others as just that, relations among self and other entities.

Durkheim: "the social is an empirical, collective object."
Weber: "the social an ideal object thought by individuals."
Marx: "The social is a real object, and it exists as relations."

The definition subscribed to by Marxists seems almost too obvious. Could this really be

Marxism? What about all the jargon? Well, Marxism is an attempt not to explain away the distractions, but to explain all kinds of relating in order to fully describe the world. In short, Marxists don't do closed systems (such as rational choice models) because closed systems are not how social relations really work. So, yes, Marxist social science can't really predict what will happen, but that does not distinguish it from any other social science.

Why all the hostility to Marxism then? Because Marxism actually does accomplish a move from "is" to "ought." Do you think this impossible? I donâ€™t, but rather see it as a philosophical and social scandal. Every scientist knows that when an experiment reveals that a theory is wrong, it means that one â€œoughtâ€• to abandon efforts to act as if the false were true. Because our politicians resist this very reasonable move from â€œisâ€• to â€œought,â€• we are creating hell on earth. And the fact that our schools teach that one cannot move from â€œisâ€• to â€œoughtâ€• should count for all of us as evidence that schools are training slaves and not free people. Because Marxism wonâ€™t shut up about how important it is to move from â€œis to â€œoughtâ€•, I give Marxists a lot of credit. For identical reasons, philosophical serpents of all kinds pour all sorts of irrelevant dirt on the name of Marxism. So let us agree, at least here on this thread, that to call something â€œMarxistâ€• is not in any way to discredit it.

Strauss is our example for this thread â€“
Strauss: "The social is an illusion, a myth deployed by the great man, who is himself an illusion if bested."

Don't get me wrong, I think Marx makes mistakes and I am working on understanding those mistakes (reading Roy Bhaskar), but I am altogether respectful of a body of writing so thoroughly disciplined by its author to prepare grounds on which we could all, not only relate as equals, but also work together on new depths of complex ethical and social action.

Posted by: citizen | May 5, 2005 06:46 PM | #

citizen

merci

Posted by: remembereringgiap | May 5, 2005 07:02 PM | #

EDIT: Because *we and* our politicians resist this very reasonable move from â€œisâ€• to â€œought,â€• we are creating hell on earth.

Posted by: citizen | May 5, 2005 07:10 PM | #

Call me unimaginative, citizen, but I find it inconceivable that Strauss could be compared to Marx in any way. To Weber, perhaps, or Durkheim--but then I don't see the point of comparing these two founders of sociology with a classical scholar who bases his occasional put-downs of sociology on his understanding of the Hebrew Bible. When Strauss takes an occasional shot at sociology, which he really doesn't bother to study. Unlike Strauss, Marx and Nietzsche are major minds,working on the level of Kant and Hegel. They've read everything, and have carefully studied, and understood, the "everythings" they've read. The work they do is incalculably rigorous, comprehensive and inventive, and they are unrelenting in the pursuit of this work. They go further, faster, harder and stronger than anyone, on any subject whatsoever. It's a matter of magnitudes--of intellectual reserves--and I like to believe that all honest writers understand this. Strauss

himself understands it. Yes, he denounces Machiavelli for "blasphemy"--one of the strangest moves I've ever seen anywhere--but this is a dogmatic value judgment of the sort that many of us tend to make when we're in over our heads, and Strauss, in his readings of Machiavelli, is definitely in over his head (something that could never be said of Marx and Nietzsche: their respective comments on Machiavelli, few and far between though they may be, show a thorough and lucid understanding of Machiavelli's project). What, then, does Strauss do well? Well, for one thing, he's done valuable work on Maimonides, Al Farabi, and the whole Medieval Andalusian reading of Aristotle. He writes with great confidence and patience when dealing with these figures--no doubt because they give at least the appearance of a pre-scholastic (non-Christian?) reading of the Greeks. Because Strauss really doesn't like Christianity! This is a limitation that has to be recognized and respected if we're to have any success in reading him at all (and I accept the fact that some folks don't want to, and perhaps wouldn't know how to, read his more technical contributions). As for his American political context, we all know very well that Strauss was appalled, and even somewhat terrified, by the McCarthyism that burned through our universities during his years in America. I'm no intellectual historian, but I hope I'm not wrong to think that this context calls for some linkage to Strauss's career in Germany and France during the thirties. I believe that if we can accept the guy for his own magnitude, successes and limitations, we get a much clearer picture of how truly mediocre, tendentious and anti-intellectual his supposed acolytes really are, and this, in my opinion, is a discrimination that truly counts. But then I've never felt a need to demonize intellectuals in my take on the political scene, because I think the Masters of the Universe never read. They certainly don't think. People who used to think, and then gravitate toward the scene of economic and political power relations, quickly lose the capacity to study ideas and concepts, and rarely, if ever, retrieve that capacity. They end up cutting deals and fabricating lies. This is not an unusual fate in our world, but it's completely removed from the career of Leo Strauss--who, I repeat, never rises to the level of Marx or Nietzsche (but then who does? maybe Freud?)

Posted by: alabama | May 5, 2005 07:50 PM | #

alabama

i think this talk of limitations is important. the scale of magnitudes. whatever i think of hegel - i am as overawed today by what he thank & how he thought it as i was when i was 20

& on that level of magnitude i also place benjamin. when i first read his work & it was the essay you have cited in fact & another essay - on mechanical reproduction - i undersestimated the work simply based on the melancholy that seemed to pin it down - a melancholy that is at the roots of althusses work & that too of poulantzas. i didn't sense the steel. now some decades down the road i understand that steel & am in awe not only of the scope but of the depth which goes far further than commentary. i am in awe of his humantiy - which he never lost - which was not so with adorno or horkheimer or the rest of the frankfurt gang. the fact too that he transcended a german jewish sensibility which was uncommon but the conflict this caused him is clear in most of his correspondances. there is grandeur even in his most simple statements - thee is grandeur sometimes because they are such simple statements

Posted by: remembereringgiap | May 5, 2005 08:37 PM | #

Why all the hostility to Marxism then? - so I am failing in my resolve shut-up, but I am too weak to let this pass. Why? How about the in-actuality operation of Marxist parties? How about the NKVD and the Lubyanka, the Ukranian famine, the Hitler-Stalin pact, the betrayal of Spain, the hungry ghosts of the great leap forward, the Cultural Revolution, Kim Il Sung, the slaughter of Budapest, the Doctors plot, the cults of personality, the "oops civil rights don't matter during the period of the popular front", the people's secret police, the hacks like Maurice Thorez and thousands of other nasty little bureaucrats itching for an opportunity to send people to the jails. You want to know why the scent of Marxism makes people instinctively revolt against the haunting spectre of the responsible comrade - my God. It's like that Belgian who asked me why people in Zaire were so hostile. History leaves scars. I forget who said it, but some European savant once said the Jews are anxious because a millenium of Christian Love has take a serious toll on them. You are welcome to explicate that the teachings of Jesus don't include burning at the stake or that the teaching of Marx don't have anything to do with Comrades Beria and Vyshinsky or Madame Mao, but reality disagrees. 150 years of the practice of scientific socialism has not invalidated Marx's brilliant analysis of economics, but it *has* validated Bakunin's argument that Marx was creating an ideology of despotism.

But according to Mr. Marx, the people not only should not abolish the State, but, on the contrary, they must strengthen and enlarge it. and turn it over to the full disposition of their benefactors, guardians, and teachers â€" the leaders of the Communist party, meaning Mr. Marx and his friends â€" who will then liberate them in their own way. They will concentrate all administrative power in their own strong hands, because the ignorant people are in need of a strong guardianship; and they will create a central state bank, which will also control all the commerce, industry, agriculture, and even science. The mass of the people will be divided into two armies, the agricultural and the industrial, under the direct command of the state engineers, who will constitute the new privileged political-scientific class.

That is Bakunin in 1872 or so. One does not need to subscribe to the theories of Strauss or Madame Thatcher or even the rather disjointed theories of Bakunin to acknowledge the acuity of this critique - 50 years before the brilliant scholar Derzhinsky set up the machinery of the charnel house.

Posted by: citizen k | May 5, 2005 08:46 PM | #

alabama-
since this thread has been so educational for us lurker types, would you be so kind as to offer a synopsis of Strauss's reading of Maimonides and Al Farabi? I was under the impression that they are central to his teachings.

Posted by: dk | May 5, 2005 08:54 PM | #

"You are welcome to explicate that the teachings of Jesus don't include burning at the stake or that the teaching of Marx don't have anything to do with Comrades Beria and Vyshinsky or Madame Mao, but reality disagrees"

citizen k 08:46

any real study of marx or marxism will explain all and any of these questions. the nature of

state formations is an area of expertise for which marx is duly known. you again conflate events that do not have anything to do with one another than they took place in the bloodiest century of all which - even the failed stae formations of russia & china did not possess & monopoly on bloodshed or on cruelty. capitalism had already built up quite a bloody reputation & it was extended in the last fifty years with terrifying rapidity on all continents

the blood that has run through this century can be separated into two terros if you will - red terror which has always been less than premediated & chaotic & the brown terror of fascism, of the colonialists & of the us empire - which has been deliberate, intentional & through in south east asia, africa, latin america etc etc

your primal anticommunism blinds you to accurate analysis. there are vast differences between count derzhinsky & yagoda & beria - there is enormous difference between the NEP & the great leap forwards, there is a qualitative difference between letting a thousand blossoms bloom & the cultural revolution, there is a sizeable difference between maurice thorez & jacques duclos or auguste lecoeur, there is a difference between the war in spain & the popular front - there are spectacular differences between madame mao & lin piao & chen po ta

etc etc etc

any fool can go through some mandatory right wing encyclopedia & root out the sins of the left - they have never hidden them - but it takes a clown to try to build a monument from all those differences

but for citizen k & perhaps for razor too we are all little lenin's writing in ou room in zurich 'left wing communism an infantile disorder' - incapable of understanding that we have lived in the bloodiest century for which no ideas have come out unstained

& personally i a tired of having to defend marxist ideas not only from inept attacks but from such a misreading of history & a utilisation of history that underlines a prejudice that is closed & far from open

i spoke on marxism on this thread because it bore a very direct relation to strauss's thought - especially set against his german contemporaries & especially his german jewish contemporaries

but i refuse to use the red flag to attack the red flag - you have offered nothing except a sneering self regard aganst a body of ideas that on whole have given this world strength heart & insight

Posted by: remembereringgiap | May 5, 2005 09:15 PM | #

rg:

Bad news. You, and everything you have been, is but product of a bag of DNA. Saint Marx, also. Time to work the old mind body con! Spirit!

The good news is that apparently some are tired of hearing of the goodness of Saint Marx and what He bestowed on a grateful and suffering mankind, and others are tired of explainign how great Saint Marx is. Accord! That is progress!

And the taint problem, aside from people equating twenty million dead in one extravaganza alone, (Don't look at us. The heretics did it!)to shopping at walmart, is that you are scaring away the customers.

Decent people, who I happen to like as decent human beings, will make the reasonable judgment that someone who lacks the sense to reject marxist non sense and its rotten history is not someone they will support, and will not waste their time listening to anyone with these taints. It is like going to the critically acclaimed best restraunt in the world, seeing bodies carried out, and deciding not to eat there, no matter how sophisticated the arguments and excuses.

And please stop misrepresenting what drives this nantucket sleigh ride on marx. Some are defending what hasn't been attacked, and insisting on the hegemony, even on this thread, of a particular vocabulary and set of mid 1800 philosophical concepts from Middle Europe. It reminds me of the right wing Christian claim that their religion is under attack when the problem is they just don't like competition and need an enemy to misdirect attention away from their own mortal failings.

I claim source questions are critical, and plead for people to address source questions without marxist jargon and others say hell no, and misrepresent. It's a real problem.

Posted by: razor | May 5, 2005 09:59 PM | #

Razor/citizen k

I don't think anyone is defending Marx the man, only ideas--some of which came from Marx, others from Gramsci, Trotsky, Serge, Orwell and many others--they are the ideas of democracy and a critical historicity; an understanding of the dynamics of capitalism and the revelations possible through analysing through dialectics. All of the ideas from these sources (ideas, not people) make it clear that the history of USSR, China, or any of the other so-called communist countries, had nothing to do with communism or socialism. This was central to Orwell's whole body of work. These societies were labelled socialist or communist by the 'communists' themselves and by the 'democrats' in the west, for the obvious reasons--to ideologically legitimate themselves in the case of the communists in the case of the former--and to discredit the idea that ordinary people can organise their own societies on a democratic basis in the case of the latter. The ideas of socialism or communism are very, very dangerous in our capitalist societies, and have been since the 18th century, so all means are deployed to continually discredit them as projects through the 'example' of Stalin or Mao. When we start to look at these as examples of â€˜actually existing socialismâ€™ then the argument has become ideologically deformed form the startâ€”and therefore pointless.

Posted by: theodor | May 5, 2005 10:30 PM | #

Citizen Giap: On the general issue, no doubt you are correct, for I have been told many times that if only I understood St. Paul, or St. Marx, or St. Hayek or St. Pinochet or even the pious St. Bush or any of the other great saints of our glorious history, small things like an occasional massacre or mass starvation or an over-enthusiastic secret policeman with his trusty pair of pliers would not bother me so much. On the specific, the difference between a pig like Madame Mao and a swine like Lin Biao I leave to greater scholars than myself - I suggest you read some Simon Leys and then some of the many great Chinese witnesses to

the efforts of both Saints. The difference between Yagoda and Derzhinsky, I know quite well. It is the difference between the devil and the devil's favorite 20th century accomplice - the intellectual who invokes him. When we total the blood of the 20th century, so much comes from the intellectuals - people of our class, the class who writes on this very forum, educated, technically adept, self-regarding, and so prone to the sin of worshiping abstractions with the sacrifice of artefacts. People like Wolfowitz, the Straussian, are just stupid and untalented versions of Derzhinsky. But if you found yourself in Abu Ghraib or in Lubyanka, those differences might not seem so great to you.

Posted by: citizen k | May 5, 2005 10:49 PM | #

How important it is to ask all the questions but not to expect any answers! Because if you ask the questions, you eventually will live the questions, and they will answer themselves.

Posted by: Rilke | May 5, 2005 10:53 PM | #

Theodor

"ideologically deformed" is what you get on this mortal plain. Marx was a man who wrote many things, some of which are vital. No one here has denied it. Ideas that can handle the deformity of this mortal world are not for mortals.

The crux is this insistence that the record is irrelevant to the idea (which would be news to the disowned heretics) and the truth still resides in the "idea". No. It doesn't.

Which is it: dealing with the current mortal predicament because that is what actually matters, or sticking to an unfalsiable idea that deforms?

Posted by: razor | May 5, 2005 11:05 PM | #

razor,

Take your first point. But your 'this insistence that the record is irrelevant to the idea' is my point. The 'record' is the record attributed by those in power in the media, business and politics. My argument is that there is no record of 'actually existing socialism'. It has always been strangled at its birth, or drowned in the blood of its adherents (first of all), then drown in the blood of anyone else who gets in the way of what 'Marx really meant'.

Posted by: theodor | May 5, 2005 11:24 PM | #

Alabama: Surely Strauss is a pigmy compared to Marx and I too would be interested in what Strauss made of Maimonides - who was himself an absurdly comprehensive thinker. But Marx is not a pure element - he is an alloy of many elements. This is a point Razor is making as well. And one of the elements that exists in Marx, noted by some of his contemporaries in the International, is a type of German-professor Eureka-ism that was so mocked by Nietzsche. "By careful study, I have unlocked the key to the true world wisdom and can now explain everything, but only to the worthy" seems to me to be common to both Strauss and Marx. But I am no philosopher, just a bystander with a reflexive dislike for certain forms of authority.

Posted by: citizen k | May 5, 2005 11:50 PM | #

was there a point in this thread, apart from razor's strawman, where anyone here has

prescribed marx as the *only* filter w/ which to work from, or am i not privy to some pseudo-straussian subcontext extrapolation here? this notion of either/or seems disingenuous and at cross-purposes to the topic at large. the elite will always seek out theories to justify & defend their governance, no matter how crude intellectually, because it's really a game of power relationships. before guttenburg, churchs held power by possessing monoply over the word, literacy & interpretation. i see strauss's ideas as being little different from this age old attempt at controlling interpretation, therefore retaining power over the masses. it is just another attempt to counter the revolutionary distribution of the written word, which empowered the masses. okay, the elite say, you might have access to more information, but you can't possible comprehend the important bits which make it clear that we have power over you, but trust us, it's in there. and you're still ignorant & we don't have to talk to you. isn't that what elitism is all about anyway? that's the role that strauss essentially serves for the neocons, apart from having played mentor to many of them in academia. anyhow, secrecy seems to be more important nowadays, at least for this administration, as they would appear to have fallen back on the idea of control over the word by not allowing anyone w/o need-to-know access to any interpretation of data. in addition, they're worried about covering up evidence of corruption.

it still boils down to elitism and power. all tangents aside, and there have been many, that's the context here, as i understand it.

Posted by: b real | May 6, 2005 12:15 AM | #

theodor

Yes, the idea should be kept alive that the world could be different and better. The kingdom of heaven, here, in our presence. Or, "Faults without efforts to amend them! Faults indeed, faults indeed."

But, marxism is not the vehicle to keep this idea alive.

For one thing, marxism provides vocabulary and concepts to explain all one doesn't like as a consequence of power residing elsewhere, and in the name of people, denies the authenticity of people. Somehow Leszek Kolakowski comes to mind. This encourages appalling laziness. People who don't know a damned thing about power talk as its intimate master. Norman Mailer has addressed the problem with regard to novelists today not knowing anything about how things actually work. They aren't in the room.

A related problem. marxists may have a beef with human nature, similar to Creationists, whose real beef is with the Creator, not scientists. It is not all capitalism and Power. Some of it is people being assholes, or just jerks to each other even innocently, in old old ways. If this is the case, marxism is the opiate for those who don't want to accept their mortal circumstances, and taking the opiate makes this mortal world worse, not better, by misdiagnosis and mistreatment and wasting of opportunities.

Posted by: razor | May 6, 2005 12:46 AM | #

b real, you pose an impossible obstacle to thought of any kind, and it's this: all thinking is interpreting--responding to the thoughts we receive. We can pursue a line of thought, or we can drop it, but if we pursue it at any length, with all its windings, internal complexities, contradictions and so on, it becomes a difficult thing. True, we can boil it down to a few aphorisms after some long and hard concentration, but then it becomes a still more difficult

thing--a string of condensed enigmas. But let's suppose we do this--what then? Well, according to you, we've simply performed an exercise in power politics, morphing ourselves into an "elite"--if only an elite of one. And all elites, by your reckoning, are absolutely evil. This is the most uncomplicated anti-intellectual statement I've read in my entire life, anywhere, ever. It does more: it fairly boils over with hatred and envy, and means to intimidate any and all who read it--nothing more, and nothing less. Which is why a writer like Leo Strauss, who knows what it's like to be intimidated by anti-intellectuals, might happen upon a phrase like "Persecution and the Art of Writing".

Posted by: alabama | May 6, 2005 12:58 AM | #

"It is only with the heart that one can see clearly; what is essential is invisible to the naked eye."

Posted by: Le Petit Prince | May 6, 2005 02:23 AM | #

@alabama

I remember asking, back at the Whiskey Bar, if you considered yourself an intellectual - a person who deals primarily in ideas. Your response was, as I recall, "God, no. Why do you ask?"

Posted by: Pat | May 6, 2005 02:39 AM | #

Razor:
I have responded to your complaints with the most basic and jargon free account of a key marxist difference, and you ignore the issue. When confronted with an actual idea that demands you think coherently and in front of people where we can see what you have to offer, have responded with mere accusations and made no effort to relate them to the ideas you pretend to critique. You have not offered anything.

Citizen k:
Citizen Giap: On the general issue, no doubt you are correct, for I have been told many times that if only I understood St. Paul, or St. Marx, or St. Hayek or St. Pinochet or even the pious St. Bush or any of the other great saints of our glorious history, small things like an occasional massacre or mass starvation or an over-enthusiastic secret policeman with his trusty pair of pliers would not bother me so much.
And now you are simply insulting. We have not asked you to ignore anything, but to pay attention to specific things. I am also a humanist - will you point out to me all the bad things that humans have done? What rotten word-magic you weave.

We are attempting to discuss the real strengths offered by Marxist thought to understand society in such a way that people can work toward a world that values each individual - and we are doing so because the world may actually be losing ground in defending individuals from being treated like fertilizer. Despite the real contributions we try to make to figuring out where our strengths are - you haven't the basic decency to critique how Marxist thought seems to you so destined to lead to travesties. I think if you honestly attempted to care about tragedies you cite as anything more than useful rhetorical firebombs, you would try to explain (which is different from merely accusing) how Marxian thought causes them. Remember, Socrates was Athens' gadfly, not its fruit fly.

You were offered Marxism in a highly technical format, and you screamed "too much

jargon." Now you have been offered it in simple language, and you dance around the issue screaming, "It burns! It burns! Aaaah, Marxism kills!" If we are wrong in our arguments, please don't keep attacking our *magic* name, show us.

Posted by: citizen | May 6, 2005 03:34 AM | #

In case I was unclear, it is not the *insulting* in simply insulting that offends me here. It's the *simple*. There should be some nourishment to go with the insult.

Posted by: citizen | May 6, 2005 03:39 AM | #

Alabama, it occurs to me that reading Strauss is not necessary useful for me or, I suspect, Billmon. I don't actually care what he said. What I want to know is what the current crop of disciples think he said and how that affects their teaching. I don't necessarily care what Jesus said. I need to know what the current crops of loonies calling themselves Christians think he said.

I understand the wish for intellectual rigour and precision, but while this is perhaps a gathering of intellectuals, this is not an academic seminar.

And I think your reading of b real's post is a little strange. I thought that he/she/it (help, I can't remember the correct gender pronoun) was attempting to return to the original topic, the use of Strauss's ideas by the current crop of philosopher-kings in the US.

Posted by: Colman | May 6, 2005 03:44 AM | #

> Well, according to you, we've simply performed an exercise in power politics, morphing ourselves into an "elite"--if only an elite of one. And all elites, by your reckoning, are absolutely evil. This is the most uncomplicated anti-intellectual statement I've read in my entire life, anywhere, ever.

Alabama, I was confused for a bit about how you got this read out of b real, and then it struck me. I think b real is talking about elites as people who seek the *power* of being at the top. But what you described as a process of making oneself an elite, is actually the process of making oneself accomplished. As this seeks skill and not necessarily power, it is a distinct endeavor. I don't see any anti-intellectualism in the post.

Posted by: citizen | May 6, 2005 03:48 AM | #

Mind you, in the current climate I can understand being a bit sensitive about anti-intellectualism. This just isn't the place to expect to find it.

Posted by: Colman | May 6, 2005 03:55 AM | #

Thank you all for this great discussion.

As this page is becoming quite long, I set up a new thread.

Please continue here.

Posted by: b | May 6, 2005 06:25 AM | #