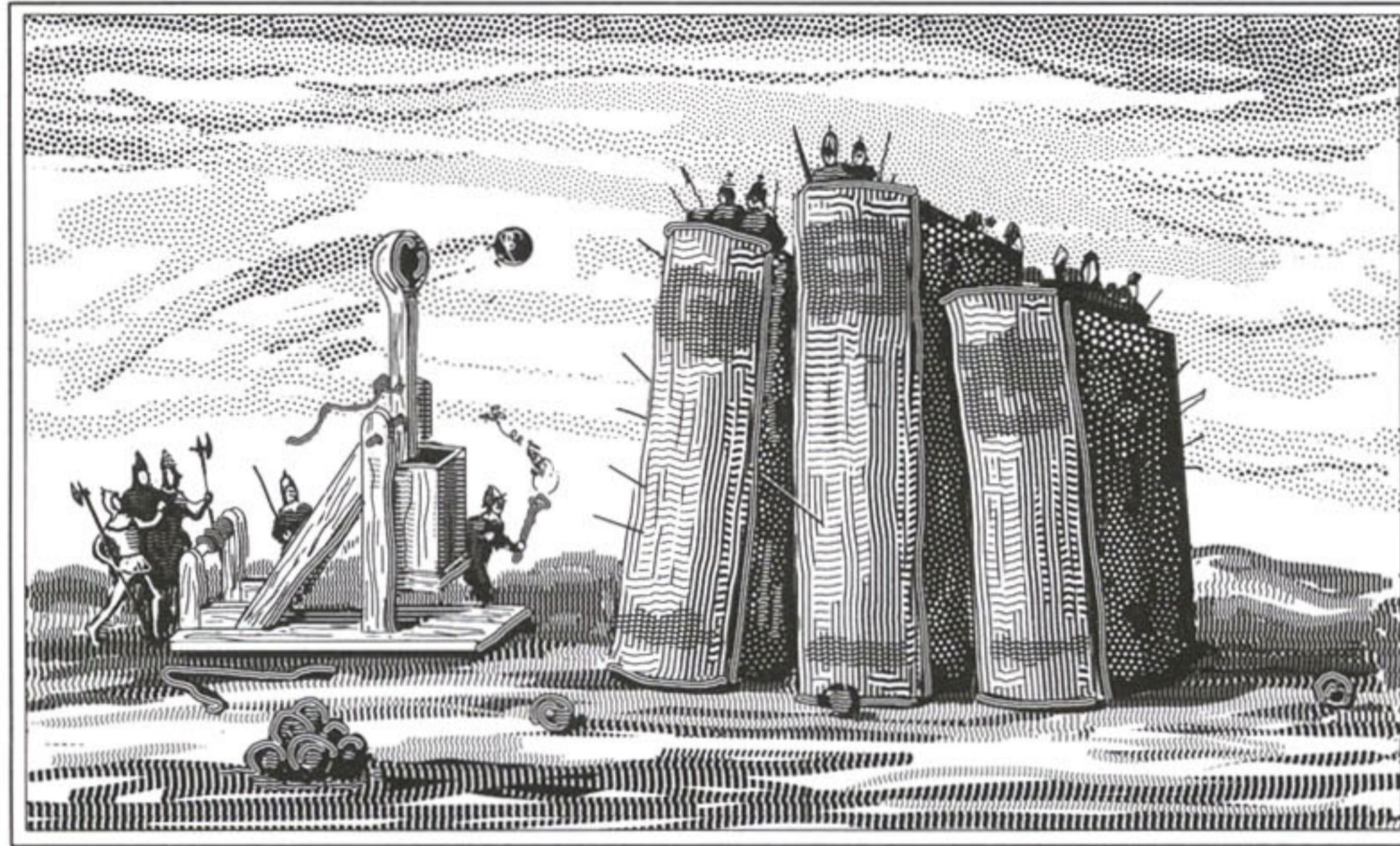


## THE STRAUSS WARS REVISITED

*Straussophobia: Defending Leo Strauss and Straussians against Shadia Drury and Other Accusers*,  
by Peter Minowitz. Lexington Books, 346 pages, \$110 (cloth), \$36.95 (paper)

*Cloaked in Virtue: Unveiling Leo Strauss and the Rhetoric of American Foreign Policy*,  
by Nicholas Xenos. Routledge, 192 pages, \$140 (cloth), \$36.95 (paper)



RELATIVELY OBSCURE IN HIS OWN LIFE-time, Leo Strauss has never been so famous—or infamous—as he is now, thanks largely to a cottage industry of detractors who paint him as the evil genius behind a neoconservative cabal. In his new book, *Straussophobia: Defending Leo Strauss and Straussians against Shadia Drury and Other Accusers*, Peter Minowitz, a professor of political philosophy at Santa Clara University, admits that he is late to the fray but has joined it in order to provide a “systematic and detailed reply that focuses on the shortcomings of the diatribes” against Strauss and his alleged followers in government and the academy.

Minowitz’s main but by no means sole target is the Canadian political scientist Shadia Drury. Not only has she produced more pages of anti-Strauss polemics than anyone else (e.g., *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss* [1988] and *Leo Strauss and the American Right* [1999]), but as Minowitz shows, she is the source of much of the ammunition discharged by others. To his credit, Minowitz is more thorough than any of Strauss’s previous defenders in exposing Drury’s “exaggerations, misquotations, contradictions, factual errors, and defective documentation.” Not all of his readers will agree that she needed to be refuted (again) at such

length, but if I were not sadly convinced by experience that her fans will credit Drury no matter how often or thoroughly she is rebutted, I would say that Minowitz leaves her not a shred of credibility.

Besides eviscerating Drury, *Straussophobia* persuasively shows that political actors like Richard Perle, Clarence Thomas, Donald Rumsfeld, and Condoleeza Rice, often said to be “Straussians,” can by no stretch of the imagination be associated with Strauss. Minowitz discusses Paul Wolfowitz more thoroughly than is normally part of the Strauss Wars literature, reiterating the point Wolfowitz himself has often made, that his chief mentor was Albert Wohlstetter, not Leo Strauss or Strauss’s student Allan Bloom. Still, in sketching the relationship between Strauss and neoconservatism, Minowitz might have said more about the differences between the older and younger generations of neoconservatives.

The book’s biggest revelation is Minowitz’s contention that Straussians are treated in the Straussophobic literature in much the same way that other “out-groups” are treated by prejudiced majorities. They are viewed through a lens of stereotype: all members are lumped together as possessing some quality undesirable to the critic, and hearsay and innuendo are allowed to

pass for evidence by individuals who normally would never reason so sloppily. The author is quick to recognize the many important differences between Straussians and more recognized out-groups, but his observations about the similarly bigoted patterns of thought directed against them are striking.

MINOWITZ’S FINAL CONTRIBUTION IS to address Nicholas Xenos’s recent book, *Cloaked in Virtue: Unveiling Leo Strauss and the Rhetoric of American Foreign Policy*, which appeared after the initial spate of books on Strauss and is worth looking at in more detail. If the first wave of Strauss critics (e.g., political scientist Stanley Rothman) faulted him for being an old-fashioned defender of antiquated moralism, and the second wave, led by Drury, argued that Strauss was not an old-fashioned moralist at all but rather a Machiavellian, a Nietzschean, or a nihilist, then Xenos represents a third wave of criticism. A political science professor at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, he retains some of Drury’s themes (consider his title), but he takes his bearings from materials largely unavailable when Drury began her work in the 1980s. Particularly important is a letter Strauss wrote to his friend Karl Löwith in 1933. “The letter to



Löwith stands as the document at the beginning, center, and conclusion of my interpretation," Xenos writes in his Introduction. The letter expresses a point of view Strauss arrived at in the early 1930s and which, although "cloaked" after he came to America, "remained constant thereafter." For Xenos, then, "Strauss is no ordinary conservative, but rather an extreme right wing anti-modernist." He and his neoconservative "followers" who defined Bush Administration foreign policy "adhered to a view of human nature and natural order that demanded an authoritarian political form."

Besides the letter to Löwith, Xenos's interpretation relies heavily on Strauss's 1932 "Notes" on Carl Schmitt's *The Concept of the Political* and Strauss's book *On Tyranny* (1950), one of his first American works. In his hard-hitting dissection of "the political," Schmitt, who later became a Nazi sympathizer, criticized liberal politics and philosophy, championing instead the irreducible distinction between friends and enemies that he saw analyzed in Hobbes's state of nature. In Xenos's reading, Strauss shared Schmitt's critique of liberalism, but didn't think Schmitt went far enough: by appealing to Hobbes, Schmitt remained within the orbit of liberal thinking. Xenos believes "Strauss's encounter with...Schmitt's *Concept*...engendered the change of orientation" that took Strauss from being a scholar of Judaism to being a right-wing anti-modernist. Xenos finds in the Notes on Schmitt what he considers Strauss's decisive insight: "the human being [is] naturally evil, and not innocently so." That is to say, human vice stems from moral baseness, not from animal-like passion for self-preservation. From this discovery Strauss allegedly deduced the duty of "authoritarian rule" or "the necessity of dominion," which Xenos believes lies at the (sometimes concealed) core of Strauss's ultra-conservative politics. Though he sees Strauss as a great enemy of liberal democracy, he faults Drury, who drew the same conclusion, for her childish tendency (my term) to emphasize Strauss's supposedly Nietzschean elitism leading up to the rule of the wise, i.e., of Strauss and his followers. On this point Xenos defends Strauss from Drury: his "profoundly reactionary penchant for authori-

tarian" forms of government was "perceived" by Strauss to be "in the interest of the ruled, not the rulers."

Nonetheless, because Xenos entirely misses the point in the Notes on Schmitt, it is little wonder that he "unveils" a figure who bears little resemblance to Leo Strauss. Strauss described 30 years later "the change of orientation" that, he wrote, had indeed "found its first expression" in his Notes on Schmitt's little book. But that change was from "the premise...that a return to pre-modern philosophy is impossible" to the belief that such a return was possible. That's what he meant when he announced that a proper critique of liberalism requires "gaining a horizon beyond liberalism." On several occasions he credited this change of view to his friend Jacob Klein, not Schmitt.

SPACE DOES NOT ALLOW ME TO EXAMINE Xenos's tendentious interpretation of *On Tyranny*, but something must be said about the now infamous 1933 letter to Löwith. Xenos's translation of it is unreliable; and he quotes only a small part of the letter, taking it out of context and making it difficult to see Strauss's point.

Writing from Paris in May 1933, not long after Hitler came to power, Strauss begins the relevant part of the letter by complaining that he "will never be able to write other than in German," but that he cannot return to Germany. Seeing "no acceptable possibility of living under the swastika," Strauss explores first what is to become of him and "men of science" like him ("as our predecessors in the Arab Middle Ages called themselves"), and then speaks of Germany itself. The solution Strauss embraces is the life of exile and wandering, and here he is almost certainly thinking of Maimonides, a medieval man of science who spent much of his life wandering. It is worth noting that in retrospect Strauss appears to have underestimated the threat posed by the Nazi regime, which he refers to as "a shabby nuisance." He refused to return not because he feared for his life or liberty, but because the regime was an affront to his dignity as a Jew.

Still seeking a way to "protest" Nazism, he speculated in the Löwith letter that because the

Communist-socialist Left and the liberal-democratic center had failed, the only solution for Germany must come from "fascist, authoritarian, and imperial [not "imperialistic," as Xenos has it] principles." Aristotle had advised how to improve tyrannies when they are the only regimes possible and the younger Strauss (he was 33 at the time) appears to be speaking in the same spirit. What is good in a given context, in short, is what is possible and better than the status quo. Thus, in his letter he ruled out arguing with the Germans on the basis of "rights of man" as "laughable and pitiful."

Xenos and others believe Strauss was speaking beyond the immediate situation in Germany. Perhaps that is so, but I don't believe that this letter establishes that with any certainty. Reportedly Hans Jonas commented that Strauss briefly supported Mussolini in the 1930s, suggesting that he was friendly to the fascist Right and not merely acting as an Aristotelian political scientist. Yet, if true, we must view this from the vantage point of 1933, not 1945 or 2010. Mussolini's government was widely praised at the time throughout the West, including by bona fide democrat Franklin Roosevelt, whose New Deal consciously emulated fascist social policy.

Even if in the 1930s Strauss was hostile to liberalism, his succeeding years led him, on the one hand, to a much more favorable view of liberal democracy, and on the other to a much deeper view of classical political philosophy. As Peter Minowitz ably reminds us, only a prejudiced reader could miss Strauss's regular, recurrent, persistent endorsement of liberal democracy as the best regime for our time, and the regime most in accord with what the classics would recommend. The Löwith letter, certainly an interesting (if ambiguous) part of Leo Strauss's biography, cannot be seen, as Nicholas Xenos and others wish to see it, as the secret core of Strauss's mature political thought.

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