

power. This explains why he was compelled to undermine Maimonides's insistence on the moral perfection of the philosopher-prophet.¹¹⁷

Strauss's political ideal is a nightmare that leaves us entirely at the mercy of cunning and ambitious priests, who are more terrifying than Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor.

CHAPTER THREE

STRAUSS'S GERMAN CONNECTION

HEIDEGGER AND SCHMITT

THERE ARE TWO GERMAN CONTEMPORARIES whose work had a lasting influence on the political thought of Leo Strauss: Martin Heidegger and Carl Schmitt. Both writers besmirched their reputations by their enthusiastic alliance with the Nazis. In this chapter, I will discuss each of these writers in turn, emphasizing the ideas that made a lasting impression on Strauss. First, I will argue that even though Strauss personally abhorred Heidegger, he shared his view of modernity—a view that is central to Strauss's understanding of America. Second, I will show that Strauss's fundamental political concepts as well as his critique of American liberal democracy are borrowed from the brilliant but disturbing work of Carl Schmitt.¹

NIETZSCHE, HEIDEGGER, AND THE NAZIS

The centrality of the holocaust in the thinking of all the German émigrés cannot be overestimated. This is true of Strauss as of all the others, even though he did not write any treatises on totalitarianism as Hannah Arendt did, or on the authoritarian personality as Theodor Adorno did. Nor would it be an exaggeration to say that political philosophy and the social sciences in the second half of the twentieth century have been preoccupied above all else with the questions: How did it happen? How could it have happened in the West? Why did it happen in the twentieth

century? Can it happen again? and How can it be prevented? These are also the questions at the heart of Strauss's political thought.

Although Strauss does not express it so starkly, his view on the connection between Nazism and modernity can be expressed briefly as follows. The Nazis were not a freakish accident of history, but a logical manifestation of the spirit of modernity. Modernity has given birth to two dangerous doctrines—nihilism and technological mastery. And taken together, they are a lethal combination. Nihilism is the view of the world as a formless chaos in which God and all His moral restraints are absent. Nihilism may be passive and resign itself to the meaningless chaos of the world; but it is more likely to be active and resolve to impose order and meaning on the void. Nazism is an active nihilism whose power has become augmented by modern technology.

Strauss believes that there is no foundation for morality except belief in "active gods" who busy themselves with man's affairs, punishing the wicked and rewarding the righteous. The ancients understood this and therefore concealed their philosophical skepticism out of a sense of social responsibility. But this ancient wisdom has disappeared, and classical rationalism has been replaced with Enlightenment rationalism, which is the hapless belief that knowledge of the truth is good for man and is bound to improve society. But in Strauss's eyes, the holocaust was ample proof that the faith in Enlightenment was altogether misplaced. It was a costly mistake, and it behooves us to return, if such a return is possible, to classical rationalism. Strauss is therefore not an antirationalist. He is deeply committed to reason and to truth despite the fact that he thinks that they undermine everything sacred. But he would like to restrict access to the world of thought to the few who can be trusted not to abuse the privilege. The Nazis were untrustworthy people; having discovered that the world was void, they took it upon themselves to re-create it according to their own specifications. In the absence of God, force, brute strength, and resoluteness filled the void and shaped the world. This is the danger of nihilism. And this danger is further augmented by the degree of technological mastery that modernity makes possible.

In his analysis of nihilism, Strauss relies on Nietzsche and Heidegger. For Strauss, the difference between these two thinkers is critical. Strauss repudiates Heidegger (as someone whose philosophy led him directly to nazism) while endorsing Nietzsche as a reincarnation of classical wisdom. Strauss's claim against Heidegger is not well substanti-

ated, although Strauss's case can be made. Before summarizing Strauss's view of the critical difference between Heidegger and Nietzsche, I will explain why Strauss, like many others, believes that Heidegger's philosophy has a special affinity with nazism.

In view of the influence of Heidegger on the powerful postmodern movement in academe, the controversy over his connections with the Nazis has become more than academic. Since the publication of Victor Farias's book, *Heidegger and Nazism*, no one dares to deny the extent of Heidegger's involvement with the party and his willingness to do its bidding as rector of the University of Freiburg.² But Heidegger's many disciples and defenders claim that there is no logical connection between his politics and his philosophy, even though they are fully aware of the fact that Heidegger himself made the connection.

It may be argued that Heidegger's political speeches are a betrayal of the radically individualistic message of his existential philosophy in the first part of *Being and Time*.³ The existential ethic of authenticity bids the individual to be true to himself, rather than living as "they" expect, and silencing the voice within, as Ivan Ilych did most of his life. Leo Tolstoy's *Death of Ivan Ilych* is often considered a more vivid account of Heidegger's view of living unauthentically, but this is not altogether accurate.⁴ Ivan lives all his life with the decorum and propriety that is expected of a man in his station. But when he faces death, he realizes that his whole life has been nothing but a web of lies; he realizes that the inner voice that he suppressed was the voice of truth, love, and forgiveness. Tolstoy's story is a Christian story because the inner voice that Ivan discovers just before his death is the voice of God and of conscience. In contrast to the Christian ethic, the existential ethic tells us simply to be true to our unique individuality, to listen to our inner voice, not because it is the voice of God or conscience, but simply because it is ours. But what does it mean to be true to oneself, to be authentic? What is the self to which we should be true?

It does not help matters to tell us that we can live authentically if we accept who we are and affirm our destiny in the spirit of Nietzsche's *amor fati*—the injunction to love our fate, to affirm our life, and to choose it energetically. This is a strange ethic indeed. Is it not more honorable to resist or rebel against a disgraceful fate, no matter how inexorable? Is that not why we admire Oedipus? He did not say: "I was destined to kill my father and marry my mother, hurrah!"

Telling us to be true to ourselves and our inner voice tells us very little about how we should live; because in truth, our inner voice is not singular, but plural, and has many conflicting messages. The question is: How do we choose among the conflicting voices within? The existential ethic leaves us lost if not totally paralyzed and unable to choose. But it also teaches that not choosing is the most unauthentic thing of all. As difficult as it is, we must be resolved to choose and must be totally committed to our choice, no matter what it is. Because of its contentless emphasis on commitment, the existential ethic can lead to the valorization of monstrous criminals as heroic nonconformists who are true to themselves. They are supposedly admired for having freely chosen their life of crime, being wholeheartedly committed to it, and heroically refusing to conform to the values shared by the rest of humanity. In short, they refuse to live as "they" expect. It seems that the road to authenticity may require turning our backs on the rules of human decency that human beings share in common. This explains why Jean-Paul Sartre valorized Jean Genet who was a pimp, a pederast, a homosexual prostitute, a thief, and a paid informer for the Nazis.⁵ From the point of view of the existential ethic, Genet lived authentically because he chose his life energetically, and put his whole heart into his vices. The same reasoning could explain why Heidegger supported Germany's snubbing the League of Nations.

Long before Heidegger, Ralph Waldo Emerson made this radically individualistic and nonconformist ethic fashionable in America. In his essay "Self-Reliance," he condemned conformity to tradition as the worst evil and celebrated faithfulness to one's inner voice as the highest virtue. Then he raised the obvious objection that neither Heidegger nor Sartre were candid enough to confront: what if the inner voice is the voice of base impulses rather than high principles? His answer contained the sort of flippancy that is at the core of the existential ethic. He bluntly stated that he did not care; if he was the child of the devil, then so be it. The inner voice was sacred, whether it was the voice of God or the devil.⁶

The best that can be said for Heidegger's existential ethic is that it is individualistic and nonconformist, and therefore it forces people to think for themselves and not just to go along with the crowd. But Heidegger betrays the individualistic core of his existential ethic in his political speeches. When the desire for authenticity is socialized, it is transformed from an individualistic into a collectivist ethic. Accordingly,

Heidegger called on the German students to surrender themselves to their führer and to embrace their destiny.⁷ When it is socialized, when it is applied to groups and not to individuals, the existential ethic becomes more disastrous for being on a grand scale.

Those who think that Heidegger's philosophy is incompatible with nazism must argue that the socialization of the existential ethic is a betrayal, and that it is a flagrant contradiction of his earlier position. But those who think that Heidegger's philosophy is compatible with nazism must argue that the existential ethic of authenticity is equally appropriate for groups, and that Heidegger's political stance is therefore compatible with his existentialism. Ironically, Heidegger's critics side with Heidegger and accept the intimate connection between his thought and his politics. This is the position accepted by Strauss—a position that was developed by a fellow émigré and a student of Heidegger, Karl Löwith.⁸

Strauss's essay on Heidegger is a mixture of admiration and contempt.⁹ Strauss is convinced that it was not an accident or a failure of judgment that led Heidegger to nazism; the logic of his thought required it. As Strauss points out, Heidegger's enthusiasm for the Nazis was not brief. As late as 1953, in his *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Heidegger spoke of the "inner truth and greatness of National Socialism." Strauss points out that the book has been whitewashed, with "errors" removed, including Heidegger's reference to the "cleansing" of the German universities—a reference to Jewish intellectuals such as Strauss and Löwith.¹⁰ Strauss surmises that by 1953, Heidegger must have known the nature of the political party he supported, yet his enthusiasm was not dampened by its atrocities.

In light of this, how could Strauss describe Heidegger as the greatest philosopher of our time? And how could such a great philosopher be captivated by the likes of Hitler? What could explain such a dreadful error of judgment? Where did Heidegger go wrong?

Strauss's answer is that Heidegger was the greatest philosopher of our time because he understood the magnitude of the crisis of the modern world. He was the only philosopher to fully comprehend the impending decadence engulfing Europe. For Strauss, Heidegger was a great diagnostician of the modern malaise, but he did not have a cure. Strauss suggests that the key to understanding the root of Heidegger's mistake is to compare him with Nietzsche. In contrast to Heidegger, Nietzsche understood the cure as well as the disease. The difference

between them is instructive. Strauss uses Nietzsche's image of the Blond Beast to make his point.

Before giving Strauss's account, it is significant to recall that the Nazis portrayed themselves as the liberators of the Blond Beast, which they took to be the symbol of the strong, natural, and healthy Nordic or Teutonic man. On one of their campaign posters, the Nazis portrayed the Blond Beast breaking the chains that hold him captive—the Jews, the capitalists, the bankers, and the Communists. Of course, the Nazis were hard-pressed to explain how the Jews could be the bankers and the Communists at the same time. But logic was not their strong suit. They portrayed themselves as the party whose goal was to liberate the noble beast from the servility that ill becomes him. The Blond Beast is portrayed as wild, strong, and beautiful; and now that his powers have been unleashed, he looks resolute and invincible. His beauty and grandeur make him look as if he is destined to triumph in the Darwinian struggle against hostile forces.¹¹ But somehow, the triumph of the strong, which is the natural order of things, has been foiled by inferior races. The success of the latter, unlike the success of the Nordic beast, is not a sign of nobility, strength, beauty, goodness, superiority, or intelligence. It is simply a function of clever but cheap tricks. However, racial justice is destined to be done; nature will have her way. The Nazis therefore portrayed themselves as the political party of both Nature and Destiny. It is somewhat paradoxical that Nature and Destiny would need a political party to champion their cause; but the Nazis were not the first or the last political party to be guilty of illogic.

Strauss rejects the Nazis' use of Nietzsche's image. Instead he proposes the following view. The Blond Beast represents Western man. Once biblical morality is exploded by nihilism, Western man becomes a beast. Biblical morality was responsible for humanizing and civilizing Western humanity; in its absence, man reverts to barbarism. Once the chains have been loosed, mercy, compassion, altruism, and brotherly love must necessarily give way to "cruelty and its kin."¹² Strauss argues that Nietzsche would never have capitulated to the Nazis as Heidegger did, because his analysis did not end with the Blond Beast, but proceeded to the Overman, which is the answer to the Blond Beast.¹³

According to Strauss, Nietzsche's Overman is none other than the philosopher of the future. Nietzsche saw the twentieth century as an age of world wars leading up to "planetary rule" exercised by a united Europe.

In this new "iron age," democratic government would give way to a new aristocracy with a "new nobility" and a "new ideal."¹⁴ The new aristocracy would consist of invisible ruling philosophers.¹⁵ This elite of supermen will rule the world society that is at hand. To accomplish his monumental task, the Overman must transcend "man as hitherto known at his highest."¹⁶ For "all previous notions of human greatness would not enable man to face the infinitely increased responsibility of the planetary age."¹⁷

For all its newness, Strauss observes that the idea of invisible ruling philosophers is reminiscent of Plato's philosopher-king. But Strauss thinks that Nietzsche's philosophers will be more concerned with "the holy" and their "philosophizing will be intrinsically religious."¹⁸ For they are heirs to the Bible and the deepening of the soul, which was the effect of biblical faith.¹⁹ This is why the Overman must be a Caesar with the heart of Christ.²⁰ But for all their apparent religiosity, the philosophers of the future will not believe in God. They will be "atheists" who are "fully loyal to the earth."²¹ The duplicity of the new ruling class is understood by Strauss as a paternalistic necessity intended to save the world from the corrosive effects of nihilism.

Strauss thinks that some of Nietzsche's predictions have turned out to be true. The twentieth century has indeed been an age of world wars ending in a struggle for planetary rule. The struggle was among the Fascists, the Communists, and the liberals. After the defeat of the Fascists, the Communists or Soviets and the liberals or Americans continued the struggle for dominance. Strauss characterizes that struggle as a competition between "iron compulsion" and "soapy advertising."²² We have since Strauss's death witnessed the triumph of soapy advertising.

For Strauss, as for Heidegger, the difference between Moscow and Washington is not of great moment, for the two are "metaphysically the same."²³ This is not to underestimate the importance of means, and Strauss has on several occasions praised the American way of colonizing the world as more humane. But the outcome is the same. A world society ruled by Washington or Moscow is the same since they are both wedded to the same egalitarianism, democracy, and technological mastery.

Strauss praises Heidegger because he understood the horrors of the world society. He recognized the magnitude of the crisis in which we live, and he rightly referred to it as the "night of the world."²⁴ The victory of the technological West over the whole planet, the social leveling, the uniformity, the disappearance of peoples, the prevalence of lonely crowds,

all seemed to Strauss, as to Heidegger, as a hitherto unsurpassed catastrophe. Strauss could not have been more sympathetic to Heidegger's despair in the face of the modern predicament. In the modern world human life is "nothing but work and recreation" and "complete emptiness!"²⁵ Strauss shares Heidegger's negativity toward modernity.

Strauss explains that it was in the face of such utter hopelessness that Heidegger grabbed at straws. It was the bleakness of modernity that made him do it. Strauss sounds almost sympathetic when he writes, "one had to be inhuman to leave it at Spengler's prognosis. Is there no hope for Europe? And therewith for mankind? It was in the spirit of such hope that Heidegger perversely welcomed 1933."²⁶ In the midst of this "night of the world," Heidegger needed hope; he therefore mistook the Nazis for Nietzsche's new planetary aristocracy. Nevertheless, Heidegger made a terrible mistake. The Nazis were not the Overman but the Blond Beast. Heidegger thought that the Nazis were a solution to the night of the world, instead of a manifestation of the darkness. He failed to understand the importance of Nietzsche's distinction. Unlike the Overman, the Nazis were altogether devoid of religiosity; instead, they radiated with the spirit of nihilism, which was also the spirit of Heidegger. And this is precisely why there is an affinity of spirit between Heidegger and the Nazis.

Like the Nazis, Heidegger did not shrink from nihilism. He made the mistake of trying to eke an ethic out of the void—the existential ethic of authenticity and resoluteness. His ethic of authenticity consisted in despising all sham certainties and living in the face of the abyss without any comforting illusions or "artificial netting" to conceal the horror.²⁷ Strauss is not too keen on authenticity. He thinks that an "artificial netting" is exactly what is needed for mankind to live a genuinely human life. Nietzsche recognized that Western civilization's devotion to truth led to its demise. Biblical faith reinforced the love of truth by insisting on probity at all costs. But Nietzsche returned to the mendacity of the ancients. He overthrew the yoke of truth. He restored "the Platonic notion of the noble delusion."²⁸ He renounced probity in favor of the noble lie. But Heidegger would deprive man of all comforting delusions and then wonder why he had become a beast.

For Strauss, the holocaust has its source in the fact that the "artificial netting" that kept the abyss at bay had been dismantled. Nietzsche understood the corrosive effects of truth but Heidegger did

not. When he finally recognized that the devotion to knowledge had turned Western civilization into a technological nightmare of barbarous mastery, Heidegger abandoned the Western tradition altogether in favor of Eastern mysticism.

In what follows, I will make two objections to Strauss's intriguing account. First, I will show that Strauss's critique of Heidegger is very problematic because Strauss shares more with Heidegger than he cares to admit. Second, I will reject Strauss's attempt to hide behind the authority of Plato and Nietzsche. I will argue that Strauss's position differs from Plato's as well as Nietzsche's, and is inferior to both.

WHY STRAUSS'S CRITIQUE OF HEIDEGGER IS PROBLEMATIC

Strauss is critical of Heidegger's "resoluteness" and suggests that the proper philosophical attitude is not resoluteness but resignation.²⁹ Strauss distinguishes between ancient and modern skepticism. He thinks that philosophy properly understood is *zetetic* or *skeptical* in the ancient sense of the term.³⁰ Strauss's defenders often describe him as a *zetetic* in order to distinguish him from modern nihilists such as Heidegger.³¹ The suggestion is that ancient skepticism was reclusive and conservative, whereas modern skeptics, such as Heidegger and his postmodern followers, are politically radical and engaged.

Ancient skeptics such as Pyrrho and Sextus Empiricus claimed to be followers of Socrates.³² Like Socrates, they thought that the unexamined life is not worth living. So they examined their lives philosophically. But after questioning everything, they found, as Socrates had before them, that they did not have knowledge. And they ended up where they started—stuck with the conventions of their time; because in the absence of knowing the truth, they had no reason to abandon the local pieties. In one sense, ancient skepticism was both futile and conservative because it left the world unchanged. But the skeptics thought that even though philosophy yields no truths on which to act or to change the world, it changes the philosopher. Philosophy leaves the world and everything in it as it was before; but the philosopher is changed by the process of philosophizing. The philosopher is still in the world, but he is not of the world. He has new spectacles with which to see the world

and its conventions. The philosophical journey makes the philosopher aware that the world and its conventions are not as solidly grounded in truth as he once thought. He begins to realize that social norms and conventions are totally arbitrary and groundless. But at the same time, he realizes that the conventions work, that they are useful, and allow people to live together in relative harmony. In the absence of knowledge that would yield a higher truth, skeptical philosophers are prepared to go along with the status quo. Terence Penelhum illustrates the similarity between these ideas and those of modern skeptics such as David Hume, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Richard Rorty. And he concludes that the results of skeptical philosophy are conservative.³³ Is this the case? And can the same be said for Leo Strauss?

It does not seem to me that skepticism necessarily leads to political conservatism. It could equally well lead to political radicalism, as it has in the case of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and other postmoderns. It is equally logical for the skeptics who discover the total groundlessness of the conventions and norms of their society to launch an all-out war against normalization, and to take pleasure in the process of deconstructing the conventions of their world, not just for themselves, but for everyone else. This is all the more likely if they are in love with the process by which normalized individuals become conscious of the total arbitrariness and groundlessness of the social norms that they had for so long considered eternal and immutable truths. Does Strauss belong with the ancient skeptics and their modern counterparts—Hume, Wittgenstein, and Rorty? Is his skepticism resigned and conservative? Or is it radical and activist like the skepticism of Foucault, Derrida, and Heidegger?

The answer depends on the conventions in which the philosopher finds himself. In a tolerably good society, Strauss would advise the philosopher to retire to his garden, enjoy the company of his friends, and uphold the status quo. But in a seriously flawed regime, the philosopher has an obligation to undermine it, to deconstruct it, to uncover its groundlessness, and to expose its shortcomings.³⁴ This is possible precisely because knowledge is power; the liberation that philosophy makes possible allows those who have been liberated from the shackles of their time to make and unmake the illusions that hold everyone else captive. But Strauss warns against becoming too intoxicated, although it is not always clear that he follows his own advice.³⁵

If the fundamental insight of skepticism is that all regimes are equally groundless, then how is the philosopher to know when to leave well enough alone and when to ferment the revolutionary cause? The explanation is that Strauss's skepticism, like most others, has limits. Strauss's skepticism does not just lead to a knowledge of one's ignorance. It also leads to insights about which ideas, norms, and myths are useful and which are not. Strauss sometimes speaks as if the modernity in which he lived was an intolerable state of affairs that must be destroyed for the sake of man's humanity.³⁶ But mostly he speaks of a crisis of impending doom. In either case, his position is not that of a recluse withdrawing into his garden and enjoying the fruits of the philosophical life. His position is politically activist; it begs for action on behalf of those alone who can rescue humanity from the impending catastrophe. Strauss is therefore not as politically conservative or as resigned as the ancient skeptics tended to be.

Strauss criticizes Heidegger for his "resolve" and his political activism. Heidegger wanted to be the führer of the führer, the éminence grise—the power behind the throne. But despite all his overtures to the importance of resignation, it must be admitted that Strauss shares the same view of the relation of philosophy to political power. He associates this view with Plato's philosopher-king, and Nietzsche's Superman, and it exercises a significant hold on him and his disciples.³⁷ Certainly, the Straussians that have flocked to the political arena, especially during the Reagan and Bush administrations, took the matter very seriously.³⁸ After all, unless there is an intimate connection between politics and philosophy, the latter cannot work its magic, and Western civilization is robbed of philosophy's redeeming properties.

Strauss also shares Heidegger's understanding of modernity as the night of the world; he shares Heidegger's dark apocalyptic premonitions and his pretentious negativity; he talks constantly in terms of crisis; he blames modernity for the impending doom. Like Heidegger, he holds modernity responsible for the propagation of the cosmopolitan spirit that accounts for the disappearance of peoples, and the homelessness of man. Like Heidegger, he associates modernity with liberalism, and he abhors its universalistic spirit, and blames it for undermining the vitality of human groups. Strauss's Jewish nationalism echoes the tribal, *volksisch*, and nationalistic ideas of Heidegger. It is not the case that Strauss merely

shares Heidegger's diagnosis of the problem. He also shares a great deal of Heidegger's solutions.

In his search for the solution to the crisis of modernity, Strauss mirrors Heidegger's style, temper, and motifs. Like Heidegger, he believes that the West is a victim of amnesia. Like Heidegger, he treats the great texts of Western civilization as a psychoanalyst treats a victim of amnesia, bringing before him words from a forgotten past in the hope of jogging his memory. Heidegger usually begins with a fragment from Heraclitus and focusing on phrases, even syllables, he attempts to excavate the lost meanings. The idea is that the forgetfulness of the original meaning has debilitated the development of Western civilization, and that the recovery of the long-buried meaning will miraculously revitalize the West and bring forth a renaissance. By the same token, Strauss believes that the original meaning of the classics has been lost, even totally perverted; and like Heidegger, he believes that this loss is at the heart of the crisis of the West. His study of the classics is not just an academic exercise; it is a therapeutic work intended to recover the vitality of the West. So understood, scholarship becomes a heroic activity that is the key to saving civilization from impending doom.

The spirit, style, and temper of Strauss's approach to philosophy bears a remarkable similarity to Heidegger's. Heidegger presents his philosophical project as the complete overthrow of the thoughtless and mindless history of philosophy. In the same way, Strauss sweeps away the history of scholarly understanding of the classics as nothing more than a thoughtless misunderstanding. Like Heidegger, he also resolves to start anew. And though they say it will not be easy, this approach is attractive precisely because it frees their students from the burden of the past, the weight of the history of philosophy, and the history of scholarship about the great philosophers.

The whole point of sweeping away the past is to start anew, and this time to take the right steps, embark on the real journey, and not get lost in the woods. Heidegger promises illumination, a clearing, or just a "lit darkness." Like Heidegger, Strauss also promises illumination; he regards philosophy as a dangerous activity that reveals a secret teaching. Both men present philosophy as a project of unconcealing. The attraction is no doubt erotic. And Strauss never tires of repeating that philosophy is the highest eros.

When Heidegger approaches a text, a text that promises the desired illumination, he invariably finds himself. His study of Parmenides is a case in point.³⁹ The same is true of Strauss's approach to the wise ancients whose texts contain the requisite illumination. If Strauss is not convinced by Plato's argument that justice leads to happiness, he dismisses it as a salutary teaching for the masses.⁴⁰ If he does not like Plato's argument about the equality of the sexes, he surmises that Plato was joking.⁴¹ And when it comes to the courses offered at universities, the Straussians and Heideggerians are characterized by the same self-referential quality. The only books recommended for reading in these courses are books by other Heideggerians or Straussians as the case may be. When all the authorities point in the same direction, the student is caught in a circle from which it is difficult to escape, even if one had the will. But most do not aspire to freedom; they are desperate for illumination; they are hungry for truth. It does not occur to them that the wise may disagree, and that philosophy is far more exciting than their limited education allows. Unfortunately, it is more comfortable to remain within the charmed circle, but it can hardly be illuminating.

Nothing made a greater impact on Strauss than Heidegger's manner of studying a text. He was totally struck by Heidegger's analysis of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*; he thought that Heidegger's approach laid bare the intellectual sinews of a text; and it was unlike anything else he had ever seen or heard.⁴² Strauss's reaction is not unusual; Heidegger's style of teaching was reputed to have a totally mesmerizing effect. He has been accused of a certain "mystical bullying."⁴³ The goal was not so much understanding as initiation in a mystical cult. This is precisely why Karl Jaspers's letter to the Denazification Commission advised against Heidegger's return to teaching after the war.⁴⁴ The gist of Jaspers's letter was that Heidegger's style was profoundly unfree, and that the students were not strong enough to withstand his sorcery. The youth are not safe with Heidegger until they can think for themselves, and Heidegger is no help where that is concerned. On a much smaller scale, the same can be said for Strauss. Except for the odd renegade, his students invariably discover what he has taught them to find in the texts.

Strauss's account of modernity, his abhorrence of liberalism, his *volksisch* proclivities, his authoritarianism, his philosophical mystique, his knack for amassing disciples, and his ability to eke an ethic out of nihilism, all bear an uncanny resemblance to the style as well as the

substance of Heidegger's thought. For all these reasons, Strauss's critique of Heidegger is disingenuous.

STRAUSS'S BOGUS AUTHORITIES: PLATO AND NIETZSCHE

Strauss may reply to this criticism by pointing to the fact that, unlike Heidegger, he has kept his nihilism secret and has not allowed it to contaminate the city. Instead, he followed Plato and Nietzsche in offering the city a concoction of noble lies and pious frauds.

Strauss invariably imparts his wisdom by relying on the authority of the great philosophers of the past. But those who read for themselves need not fall prey to Strauss's bogus authorities. Neither Plato nor Nietzsche endorsed lies and deception on a mass scale as a political ploy necessary to save civilization from the horrors of truth and the abyss of nihilism.⁴⁵

Plato made a distinction between the deliberate lie and the lie in the soul.⁴⁶ The deliberate liar knows the truth but the lie in the soul is a profound self-deception. There is another equally important distinction to be made among deliberate lies: that is the distinction between the noble and ignoble lie. Plato thought of his own myths as true myths or noble lies and regarded Homer's myths as false and ignoble. The difference is not in the literal truth of the myth, but in its moral. Homer's myths were lies because they promoted a false image of ourselves; they taught that all our vices can be blamed on the gods. If someone lost his temper and did something rash and violent, then Zeus made him do it; if someone committed adultery, then Aphrodite must have got hold of his mind. These myths are pernicious lies because they allow us to deceive ourselves about our nature; they allow us to live a lie and to pretend that we are not responsible for our actions.⁴⁷ That is the lie in the soul that Plato abhorred. In contrast, he believed that all sorts of myths and stories may convey a true moral even though they are not literally true. He thought that the myth of metals was a noble lie.⁴⁸ But he did not justify the lie simply on the basis of the salutary effects it may have, nor did he think that lying was necessary because the truth is intolerable and must be kept hidden from the multitude. Plato intended his myths to be a fanciful account of the truth—the myth of the cave, the myth of metals, the story of Gyges, the story of Leontius, and the

parable of the ship are all intended as fictions depicting profound truths about political life and the human condition. The magical ring that made Gyges, the shepherd in the service of the king of Lydia, invisible, is a good example. With this ring, Gyges seduced the queen and with her help murdered the king and took over the kingdom.⁴⁹ The moral of the story is that hardly any of us could withstand the acid test of Gyges and escape with our characters intact. Only men and women of real mettle can withstand the ordeal of Gyges. Just as only men and women with golden souls can withstand the temptations of politics, because politics is like the ring of Gyges—it presents opportunities to do wrong with impunity. This is precisely why Plato thought that the political problem par excellence was moral.

Plato's myths are not a set of lies intended to dupe the multitude and secure power for a special elite, especially one that is convinced that its destiny is to rescue civilization from impending doom.

Nietzsche's position on the role of myths and illusions differs significantly from Plato's. But it is equally instructive. Unlike Plato, he did not associate the truth with the light but with darkness. Fearing that the truth was a void that would lead to nihilism, despair, and despondency, Nietzsche praised the life-giving illusion.⁵⁰ But this was not a license for indiscriminate lying intended to manipulate others and gain power. It was intended to impose on life a meaning that would give it vitality and significance. Feast your eyes on Plutarch, Nietzsche advised, and dare to believe in his heroes. Nietzsche cared little that these heroes were fictions. His only worry was that the fictions could become so grandiose and so ridiculous that instead of inspiring life and action, they may paralyze it.⁵¹ After all, what could possibly compare to Pythagoras's golden hips, or Plato's virgin birth? If the past becomes too grand, life in the present may look paltry and worthless. Nietzsche's myths and illusions are not so much lies as ideals.

Nietzsche celebrated the lie because he wanted the philosophers of the future to be brave enough not to despair in the face of the truth of nihilism; he wanted them to be great artists who would consider the void as an opportunity to create beautiful myths and illusions of their own—illusions that would humanize and beautify an otherwise cold and heartless world.⁵² Nor would these free spirits despise their creations any less for not being true; unlike Socrates, they would not be captivated by truth; on the contrary, they would love their illusions like artists love

their creations. Nietzsche's Supermen are bewitched by their illusions, and this is a far cry from Strauss's liars who fancy themselves gods playing pranks on mere mortals. Nietzsche's lies are more like ideals than deliberate falsifications of reality—ideals that the free spirits are eager to live by. In contrast, the heartless liar lives by a standard other than the one he imposes on others.

Strauss's position is a tasteless mixture of Plato and Nietzsche that is inferior to both. Contrary to Plato's sunny disposition, Strauss finds the truth dark, even sordid, and threatening to political order and stability. But even though Strauss begins with Nietzsche's assumptions about the darkness of truth, he ends with Plato's conclusions. Instead of descending into the cave with knowledge of the sunny truth, he believes that the role of the philosopher is to manipulate the images in the cave. He teaches that philosophers must fabricate lies for the many while embracing the darkness for themselves. Unwittingly, Strauss cultivates an unprincipled elite whose lies are intended for others and not for themselves. It is the sort of elite that would be regarded with contempt by Nietzsche and Plato alike.

LYING AND POLITICS

Hannah Arendt described totalitarianism as the triumph of politics over truth.⁵³ She thought that propaganda or the systematic attempt to conceal the truth was the fundamental ploy of totalitarian politics. But she could not have dreamed that these totalitarian tactics would be rehabilitated, made respectable, and considered politics as usual.

There has always been a tension between politics and truth-telling. No one who undertakes the special obligation of caring for the community can afford the luxury of perfect honesty. Anyone who is not willing to tell a petty lie to save his state from annihilation is not fit for a political career. And in very extreme cases, Machiavelli may have been right when he said that a prince must love his country more than his soul; as someone who is entrusted with the care and preservation of his community, he may have to do things that in the Christian faith are punishable by eternal damnation.

The problem with our postmodern world is that politics is no longer seen as the domain of judicious lying. Politics has become an

arena of creative lying. Lying has become synonymous with politics; it is now considered an art. This state of affairs could not have come to be without the rehabilitation and transfiguration of lying into the supreme virtue of the postmodern world. Believing that it is following Nietzsche's lead, the postmodern world has dispensed with truth. But in a world devoid of truth, can we call the fabrication of reality a lie? No, that is impossible when the lie is all the truth there is. In the postmodern world, there are interpretations without texts, illusions without reality, and conventions without nature. In a world where reality is a void, the creative art rules supreme. In such a world, what could be more creative than lying? After all, a great lie, one that is believed, gives form to the void, imposes order on chaos, and creates the world *ex nihilo*. In such a world, one must dispense with the concept of lies as well as the concept of ideology, because they contain a hint of moral contempt, a certain self-righteousness, and a smug belief that there is a truth beneath the lie, a truth that transcends ideologies. The electronic media and its capacity for instant mass communication lend themselves to this state of affairs.

Strauss has unwittingly allied himself with the postmodern tradition that has rehabilitated totalitarian tactics in politics. He has dispensed with truth in the political arena and endorsed systematic lying—supposedly out of love for humanity. But far from saving civilization, Straussian political wisdom aggravates the problems of modern politics—contempt for politicians, lack of trust in the political process, and rampant cynicism. Besides, an elite that identifies its own pursuit of power with the necessary means of preserving Western civilization and preempting catastrophe is bound to be an unprincipled elite, unfit for political power. The loftiness of their enterprise, coupled with their sense of crisis, may lead them to sweep aside moral limits as applicable only to other people. The tragedy is that Strauss unwittingly prepares the way for the Blond Beast. And like Heidegger, he confuses the bestial and the noble.

CARL SCHMITT DENOUNCES LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

Carl Schmitt is famous for three ideas about politics that are central to Strauss's political thought in general and to his understanding and

critique of American liberal democracy in particular. First is the idea that liberalism is a terrible blight on European history that has extinguished the glory of politics and replaced it with the banality of economics. Second is the idea that liberalism and democracy are incompatible, and that the latter is preferable to the former. Third is the idea that politics is a glorious affair that has been eclipsed by the triumph of liberal democracy. I will discuss each of these in turn.

Schmitt's critique of liberalism is part of a grand tale about the history of European civilization. The story is one of decline and degeneration, deception and chicanery. It all begins with royal absolutism, which Schmitt regards as the pinnacle of European civilization. In his view, royal absolutism was a state of affairs that reflected the elegance of the cosmos—hierarchy and order, discipline and vitality. Just as the world was ruled by a supreme lawgiver, so the state was ruled by a supreme sovereign. Just as God was not himself bound by his own laws, so the sovereign was above the law. Nor was this a harsh, mechanical, or tiresome state of affairs; on the contrary, it was a universe full of pardons, amnesties, contingencies, exceptions, and emergencies—all the things that require the direct interference of God. Like God, the sovereign was free to pardon; and in an emergency that threatened the life of the state, the sovereign was free to act without the restraint of law. Schmitt compares the sovereign's capacity to come to the rescue of the state with God's miracles.⁵⁴

For Schmitt, the state has its source in will, or what he calls "decisionism." Following Joseph de Maistre, Schmitt reduces the state to "the moment of decision, to a pure decision not based on reason and discussion and not justifying itself, that is, to an absolute decision created out of nothingness."⁵⁵ Like God, the sovereign creates *ex nihilo*; and like God, he has no obligation to be rational. Schmitt's politics is based on an existential theology—a willful and inscrutable God.

Unhappily, this exhilarating state of affairs has been eclipsed by an utterly drab and mechanical view of things. The Enlightenment philosophers led an assault on royal absolutism in the name of reason, law, and justice. They replaced the traditional God with a deist God. In the deist universe, God creates the world but he does not interfere with it. His relation to the world is like that of the watchmaker to his clock. The deist universe is orderly, mechanistic, and predictable—it is a universe in which pardons as well as miracles have disappeared. The constitutional state is

the mirror image of the deist universe. And far from thinking that the new order magnifies liberty, Schmitt laments it as a "tyranny of reason."⁵⁶ The expression exemplifies the postmodern view of modernity.⁵⁷

In Schmitt's view, the history of European civilization since the French Revolution of 1789 has been characterized by the "triumphal march of democracy."⁵⁸ Democracy replaces the sovereignty of the king with the sovereignty of the people. But as a mere *form* of government, democracy is vacuous and has little appeal. It can only be defended if it is made substantive, or if the will of the people is given a definite content. But unfortunately, the people cannot be relied on to know their own true will; someone must educate and lead them. Rousseau, the founder of democratic thought, suggests a lawgiver with the power to transform human nature and to shape the will of the people. Democracy flounders on just how the people's will is to be formed.⁵⁹ And until the time comes when the people know their true will, a vanguard party or a single dictator may be the true bearer of the people's will. This is the "Jacobin logic" of Rousseau that makes democracy compatible with Bolshevism, Caesarism, and dictatorship.⁶⁰ Even though democracy is self-refuting, it has remained the most irresistible political force in European history. Every political movement that hopes to succeed must present itself in democratic guise—liberalism, Marxism, and socialism have done just that.

Schmitt regards the rise of liberalism in the nineteenth century as a far greater calamity than the triumphal march of democracy. In Schmitt's view, the historical alliance of liberalism and democracy against absolute monarchy has camouflaged the deep conflict between them. Schmitt drives a wedge between liberalism and democracy. Liberalism is individualistic, apolitical, and radically egalitarian. It is predicated on the equal worth of every adult person, simply for being a person. Its respect for the human worth of the individual leads it to demand political and economic equality on a global scale. Schmitt defines liberalism as a "democracy of mankind" where every person is equally entitled to citizenship.⁶¹ In contrast, democracy advocates a much more limited equality—the equality of citizens who are equal in virtue of their physical, linguistic, cultural, moral, or religious sameness. Democracy therefore presupposes homogeneity, and the exclusion of the heterogeneous. Democracy understands the concept of the foreign, the outsider, or the other.⁶² Democracy is not indiscriminately egalitarian.

Even colonies like Australia have immigration policies that admit only "the right type of settler." It is quite consistent with the logic of democracy to exclude slaves, aristocrats, atheists, or barbarians. This was as true of Athens as of the British Empire. Democracy is political, whereas liberalism is global and apolitical. Democracy requires homogeneity, but liberalism protects individuality. This is why liberalism and democracy are incompatible, and why any regime in which they exist simultaneously must choose between them. Schmitt's own choice is clear. He denounces liberalism because it upholds the equality of individuals—all men are created equal. In Schmitt's view, the global character of liberal equality makes it meaningless. Where everyone is equally privileged, no one has any privileges. Politics is about distinctions and inequality; and in destroying the latter, liberalism also destroys politics. And since politics is linked to man's humanity, the triumph of liberalism is a greater calamity than the success of democracy.

There is something cosmic and apocalyptic about Schmitt's critique of liberalism. Liberalism depoliticizes the world, it trivializes it, robs it of all its seriousness, and turns it into entertainment. By the same token, it transforms political problems into organizational, economic, technical, and sociological "tasks." It turns the state into a "huge industrial plant."⁶³ Liberalism is the borification of the world. Schmitt associates it with the state of affairs that Max Weber anticipated with horror—the world of "specialists without spirit and sensualists without heart."

Schmitt's critique of liberalism is ambiguous. On one hand, he laments the liberal depoliticization of the world; on the other, he accuses liberalism of having forged a new and more deadly friend-enemy grouping. Schmitt sets out to unmask the apolitical character of liberalism as a fraud. Liberalism may pretend to establish a world that transcends the filthy and rapacious world of politics, it may look like it is replacing war and politics with reason and commerce, but far from abolishing the political, liberalism introduces a more intense and unclean politics that is as lethal as the religious politics of old. It introduces a covert global politics.

For all its egalitarianism, Schmitt does not for a moment believe that liberalism has banished inequality. Banned from the political sphere, inequality is confined to the economic domain, where it rules with a vengeance. Liberalism has inaugurated a world of economic imperialism

that is even more exploitative than the old political mode of domination. All that has been accomplished by the liberal revolution is the replacement of the overt repression of the political with the covert repression of the economic.⁶⁴ Schmitt's complaint about the clandestine nature of modern politics is echoed in Michel Foucault's complaint about the nature of post-Enlightenment power in general. What is wrong with the new modes of power is that they are covert and clandestine, as opposed to the old modes that were overt and conspicuous.⁶⁵ In the post-Enlightenment era, power is masked by moralistic conceptions of justice, truth, goodness, humanity, and rationality, which pretend to universal validity.

Schmitt admires the genius of Marx, who understood that liberalism can only be fought in its own economic domain with its own quasi-religious weapons. But he regards Marxism as a hybrid of liberalism. Like the latter, it denounces the political while forging a friend/enemy grouping that encompasses the whole world.⁶⁶

The last aspect of liberal hypocrisy that Schmitt sets out to expose is parliament—the liberal institution par excellence. It represents the liberal belief in endless talk—freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly. At the root of this liberal faith in speech is the belief that through open discussion truth and justice will come to the fore. Schmitt balks at this faith in openness and discussion, which he associates with impotence and effeminacy. In his *Political Romanticism* he links liberalism with the romanticism of Adam Müller, whom he depicts as incapable of being manly and decisive.⁶⁷ Given a choice between Christ and Barabbas, liberals suggest that a committee should examine the matter.⁶⁸ In Schmitt's view, liberal society is crippled by indecisiveness and is doomed to perish in an emergency. Liberalism has absolutely no understanding of politics and no capacity for decision. For Schmitt, politics is about decisions and choices that are not grounded in reason, and therefore cannot be the result of parliamentary debate and discussion.

Schmitt denies that the "crisis of parliamentary democracy" has its source in the external threats of fascism or socialism; rather, it has its source in liberalism itself. It has its source in the fact that liberalism no longer believes in its own principles.⁶⁹ Parliament presupposes individuals who are free to convince and be convinced by others of the truth or rightness of certain positions. This assumes that they are not hampered

by party loyalty. But this is no longer the case. Instead of setting out to discover what is rationally correct, parliamentary government has become a contest of competing interests. Open debate has become an "empty formality" appealing to the passions in an effort to manipulate public opinion. The idea is to win a majority and use it to govern absolutely. There is no longer any meaningful distinction between a constitutional regime based on persuasion, and an absolute regime based on command. Instead of open debate, parliament now resorts to a multiplicity of committees that make decisions in secret and behind closed doors. Parliament is but a front for the "committees of invisible rulers."⁷⁰

As we shall see, Schmitt's critique of liberalism is echoed in the Straussian critique of American liberalism. Schmitt's critique of liberalism is threefold. First, liberalism is hypocritical; it has its roots in the faith that open debate will allow truth and justice to emerge. But instead, parliament has given way to endless committees and secret decisions behind closed doors. Although there is an undeniable validity to this critique, it is an internal critique, a critique that a liberal would make of the failures of liberal society to actualize liberal ideals.

Second, liberalism replaces the closed societies of old with an insipid and meaningless global egalitarianism. This picture of liberalism as a democracy of the world, where every person is entitled to equal citizenship by virtue of being a person, is in my view, a preposterous fiction. To the extent that liberalism allies itself with capitalism, insists on free trade, and subordinates the political to the economic, it does indeed generate global forces with their own logic of economic domination. But by the same token, there is nothing inconsistent about liberalism in one country.

The idea that liberalism is a democracy of the world is a caricature of liberalism presented by Schmitt and echoed by Strauss and his American followers. But in truth, liberalism is not by nature egalitarian, but meritocratic. It tries to replace an inequality based on birth with one based on talents. In aristocratic or class societies, a person's status is determined by birth or luck. But the liberal ideology of equal opportunity declares the status of individuals to be a function of their own talents and abilities, or lack thereof. Those who are at the bottom of the social scale have only themselves to blame—they are either stupid, lazy, or both. This is precisely what makes liberal inequality so hard to bear.

It also explains why liberal society must perpetually work to make equality of opportunity a reality, even though the latter can never be achieved. The critique of liberalism as an indiscriminate egalitarianism that banishes all inequality is an attack on a straw man. In truth, liberalism is not only egalitarian, it provides a harsh rationale for inequality. But even though Schmitt's account of liberalism has not a shred of support in liberal theory, it has played a large role in the Straussian critique of American liberalism.

Third, Schmitt fears that the nascent globalism at the heart of liberalism will mean the eclipse of the political—and that would be the greatest catastrophe of all, since it would drain the world of everything meaningful, magnificent, and glorious—namely, the political. Again, this criticism plays a significant role in the Straussian critique of American liberalism.

As we shall see, Schmitt's critique of liberalism is central to the Straussian understanding of America. Like Schmitt, Strauss's American followers drive a wedge between liberalism and democracy. They affirm democracy because, like Schmitt, they think that democracy is vacuous and depends on who will shape the will of the people. Following Schmitt, they repudiate American liberalism because they regard it as a leveling and homogenizing brand of imperialism.

SCHMITT CELEBRATES POLITICS

In his *Concept of the Political*, Carl Schmitt romanticizes the political. He argues that politics is an autonomous and unique domain of life that is distinct from the moral, religious, economic, and aesthetic dimensions of existence. According to Schmitt, each domain of existence has its own peculiar dualism: morality is about good and evil, economics is about profits and liabilities, and aesthetics is about beauty and ugliness. What is true of all these domains of life, is equally true of the political, which has its own peculiar dualism—the *friend* and the *foe*.⁷¹ Schmitt goes to great length to show that this peculiarly political distinction is not identical to any of these other distinctions, nor does it overlap with any of them. The political enemy "need not be morally evil or aesthetically ugly," he need not even be an "economic competitor."⁷² It suffices that the political enemy is "the other, the stranger, . . . something different

and alien.⁷³ The foe is one who threatens one's own existence and way of life. To be political is to recognize the foe and to keep him at bay.

Schmitt fancies himself a latter-day Hobbes. Like Hobbes, he believes that the supreme political problem in his day, as in Hobbes's, is the absence of an absolute sovereign whose political authority is incontrovertible. What is needed is an absolute power with a jurisdiction over life and death. Like Hobbes, he thinks that only such a sovereign can ward off chaos and secure peace. But Schmitt demands not just peace, but "total peace."⁷⁴ This requires the absolute unity, singularity, and cohesiveness of the state. To secure this total peace, the state must be free to define the foe as it sees fit. This means that the foe need not simply be an external foe. In "critical situations" the state can declare a "domestic enemy."⁷⁵

Schmitt was first and foremost a political realist concerned with the survival of the state. Schmitt was critical of the Weimar Republic because its liberal constitution was antithetical to what he considered an intelligent understanding of the political. If Weimar was to survive, Schmitt thought that it should eliminate the two extremist parties—the Communists and the Nazis—because they threatened the very being of the regime. Schmitt wrote a letter to President Paul von Hindenburg advising him to do just that.⁷⁶ Needless to say, his advice was not heeded and Weimar was destroyed. In Schmitt's eyes, as in the eyes of many other German writers, including Leo Strauss, Weimar became the paradigm of liberalism—weak, spineless, and stupid.

It is not difficult to understand why Schmitt embraced Hitler and the Nazis with enthusiasm—he became their leading jurist and intellectual ornament. He wrote wildly anti-Semitic articles blaming Jews (from Spinoza to Marx) for the intellectual paralysis of Leviathan; he also wrote articles legally justifying the Nazi purges. Unlike the liberal-minded Hindenburg (operating in a vacuum of legalistic doctrines), Hitler understood politics—that is, he grasped the fundamental idea of the foe, and proceeded to eliminate it with a deadly efficiency. But unfortunately for Schmitt, the Nazis discovered the letter he had written to Hindenburg and had him expelled from the party. This misfortune served him well in 1945 when he appeared before the Allied War Crimes Tribunal at Nuremberg.⁷⁷

Schmitt's defenders have argued that Schmitt made an effort to purify the enemy from all moralistic contamination, and in so doing,

posited a "clean enemy." This, they believe, is a very good idea, because it has the effect of moderating politics, and undermining the venomous hatred that is often heaped on political enemies when morality and religion are confused with politics. The idea is that when political enemies are not regarded as the incarnation of evil, then there is little reason to destroy them; it suffices that they be made innocuous. Morality and religion have the effect of intensifying the inhumanity of the political. They make the enemy unclean, and hence make politics more savage than it has to be. A war against an enemy who is considered evil is the most intense and inhuman of wars because it is not satisfied with defeating the enemy but will not rest until the enemy is totally destroyed.⁷⁸

This interpretation of Schmitt is partially confirmed by his text. But it remains the case that politics consists of "the most intense and extreme antagonism."⁷⁹ And this antagonism naturally results in war, which Schmitt understands as the "*existential negation* of the enemy."⁸⁰ The point of purifying the enemy is not just an effort to moderate the excessive inhumanity of war, it is intended to underscore the supremacy of the political in its own totally unchallenged domain. To isolate the political domain from all other human endeavors and to make it autonomous and self-sufficient is intended to insure that the political is subservient to no other domain of existence. In other words, political enmity is a self-sufficient reason to kill the other for the simple reason that he is other, different, or alien. It suffices that he is defined as the *foe*. It is political authority that defines the foe; and this definition cannot be challenged by considerations of religion, morality, or aesthetics. The political is the domain of life and death, killing and being killed. Political enmity is a sufficient reason to kill. In Schmitt's view, there is no ethical principle necessary or possible that can justify war and killing, which is why he rejects the whole idea of a just war.⁸¹ The point of making politics autonomous is to make it into a domain that is exempt from providing any justification for killing—a domain of life that is not subject to reason.⁸² It matters not at all whether the enemy is ugly or beautiful, wicked or innocent, an infidel or a believer. Schmitt's enemy may be clean, but there is absolutely no reason for thinking that the clean enemy makes politics more humane.

There is no doubt that the Nazis must have appeared to Schmitt as paradigms of the political. They not only defined the foe, they also

confronted a pure political enemy. Indeed, Hannah Arendt's description of Adolph Eichmann can be seen as a variation on the theme of the pure political enemy. In her *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, she reveals the extent to which Eichmann went about conducting his business of exterminating the Jews without animus or hatred. He can indeed be said to have confronted a clean enemy. He never hated them; he never thought that they were evil, ugly, or economically threatening; they deserved extermination because they were *other*. It seems to me that this is the logic of Schmitt's political—it provides human life with a domain of violence free of guilt.

What is troublesome about Schmitt's efforts to purify the political is that such purification is likely to make politics more rather than less inhuman than it generally is. But one wonders if the cleanliness with which Eichmann confronted his enemies was not the reason for the efficiency he displayed in their extermination. If Arendt's portrait of Eichmann reveals anything, it reveals that the political as understood by Schmitt and Eichmann is nothing but an alibi for thoughtlessness and vulgarity.⁸³

It is important to note that there is a certain ambiguity in Schmitt's account of politics. Schmitt's conception of the political has two dimensions that are not altogether compatible with one another. On one hand, Schmitt writes as if the political is a datum, a fact of life, an irreducible reality that only the self-deluded can deny. On the other hand, Schmitt speaks as if the political is something honorific and glorious, which has been obscured and forgotten in a world dominated by the economic or vulgar. He romanticizes the political, and regrets that it has been undermined by the success of liberalism. It is not that liberalism has simply obscured or hidden the truth from view; it has eclipsed a superior world that was more real, more serious, and more manly. There is a tension between these two accounts.

If the political is indeed a fundamental and irreducible reality, then one need not fear that it will be eclipsed by liberalism or any other development. This is the sense in which he uses the term when he says that liberalism may have camouflaged the political but it has not succeeded in exterminating it, and that far from transcending it, has intensified it. If the political is indeed an eternal and irreducible fact of life, then there is no sense lamenting its loss.

In a fascinating essay, Schmitt describes the history of Europe in the last four centuries as an unsuccessful movement in the direction of

neutralization and depoliticization. He claims that Europeans have been searching for a neutral ground that transcends politics but every time they find one it becomes politicized.⁸⁴ This implies that there is no escaping from the political; there is no neutral ground where peace and agreement are possible. In fact, all attempts to escape from politics only succeed in intensifying it; we are now standing on the threshold of a grand political conflagration. In the sixteenth century, theological war led Europe to search for a neutral ground outside the theological. But no sooner is such a neutral ground found then it becomes politicized, and a new domain of neutrality is sought. The theological age gave way to the metaphysical age (seventeenth century), which in turn gave way to the humanitarian or moral age (eighteenth century), which in turn gave way to the economic age (nineteenth century). In every case, the neutral zone that is discovered loses its objectivity and is politicized. The latest zone of neutrality to be discovered is technology. The new religion of technicity is characterized by the belief that this is a genuinely neutral zone. Schmitt believes that technology is in fact neutral between the revolutionary and the reactionary, war and peace, centralism and decentralism. But to say that a genuine neutral domain has been discovered is not to say that the world has been permanently depoliticized. On the contrary, as Schmitt himself recognizes, the very neutrality of technology and the hitherto unsurpassed power it provides those who can wield it are bound to inaugurate a new age of terrible wars. What remains to be seen is what forces will emerge, what new friend-enemy groupings will wield its power.⁸⁵ If this is the case, then politics is an ineradicable component of existence, and it makes no sense to lament its eclipse.

STRAUSS RADICALIZES SCHMITT

In his commentary on Schmitt's book, Strauss reveals the extent to which Schmitt's concept of the political proved irresistible. Strauss is unable to liberate himself from the conception of the political by which his people were so tragically victimized. He shares Schmitt's demonization of liberalism; he accepts Schmitt's characterization of the political as the organization of men into fighting units; he accepts Schmitt's analysis of politics in terms of the distinction between friend and foe, *we* and *they*. All this is clear not only in his commentary on Schmitt, but in

his analysis of the Jewish problem, and even in his commentaries on Plato.⁸⁶ The similarities between Strauss and Schmitt notwithstanding, there is an important difference between them.

Strauss is aware of the ambiguity in Schmitt's conception of the political; and his commentary amounts to telling Schmitt how to be more consistent. Strauss rightly argues that the political cannot simply be affirmed on the basis of its reality, or because it exists. It must be affirmed because it is superior to a depoliticized world. What is wrong with liberalism is that it depoliticizes the world; and this is a phenomenon that Strauss appears to take more seriously than Schmitt. The latter always seems confident about the irreducible fact of politics. But Strauss genuinely worries that the political will be totally eclipsed from the world. For Strauss, the political is not an inescapable destiny of man, for there are powerful (liberal) forces that are pacifying and depoliticizing the world. And if they succeed, the world will become less human. The depoliticization of the world would be a catastrophe because Strauss thinks of politics as a humanizing force. He therefore regards liberalism as a threat to man's humanity.⁸⁷ Strauss's view of the political and his demonization of liberalism are more consistent and more radical than Schmitt's.

Strauss believes that the root of Schmitt's error was in his admiration of Hobbes. Strauss totally disagrees with Schmitt that Hobbes's understanding of politics was luminous. On the contrary, Hobbes lays the foundations of the liberal tradition that Schmitt hoped to escape. Strauss points out that even though Hobbes's state of nature was a state of war of all against all, it was not political—it was not the enmity of organized groups, which presupposes friendship within the group.⁸⁸ Hobbes begins with a condition of war and enmity only to transcend it. Strauss reminds Schmitt that for Hobbes, life and security are the ultimate ends—ends that are deeply at odds with the political, which requires men to kill and die.⁸⁹

Strauss rightly claims that Schmitt's position assumes the goodness of the political and its intimate connection with man's humanity. He agrees with Schmitt that politics needs to be defended against its modern negation. But if politics is to make human life serious again, if it is to rescue humanity from the triviality of liberalism, then it must be wedded to the most serious questions about right and wrong, good and evil, truth and falsehood. In short, Schmitt's insistence on the autonomy of

politics prevents politics from playing a serious role in human life, and in so doing, frustrates Schmitt's own purpose.

The solution that Strauss proposes is to re-theologize the political. Strauss rejects Schmitt's insistence on the autonomy of politics because he believes that politics needs all the help it can get from other domains of life. Deprived of its alliance with religion and morality, Strauss argues that politics cannot succeed in accomplishing its task of uniting people and making them willing to lay down their lives for the collective.⁹⁰ Strauss argues that despite his praise for Hobbes, Schmitt just does not take the evil and selfishness of humanity seriously enough. The function of the state is to humanize man or to cultivate his social nature. This is no mean task, and it cannot be accomplished simply by commanding men to fight for material gains—for territory, wealth, or a higher standard of living. The secular state cannot inspire men to fight and die. Something more is necessary—something magnificent and majestic, something splendid and sublime, something like Judaism, Christianity, or Islam.

It is not a question of believing that religion and morality are superior to politics and should govern it. On the contrary, Strauss sees religion and morality as subservient to politics and ministering to its needs. His reinterpretation of Maimonides makes it clear that religion is a pious fraud perpetrated by prophets and wise men who knew just what people needed to make them into a single fighting force ready to lay down their selfish interests and sacrifice their lives for the group. Strauss regards justice itself to be a political invention—a matter of doing good to friends and evil to enemies.

In the final analysis, Strauss's view of politics is much harsher and more radical than Schmitt's. By linking faith and politics, Strauss makes the latter more dangerous and more bloody. And Strauss's critique of Schmitt amounts to saying that Schmitt just does not go far enough.⁹¹

In conclusion, there is a certain sense in which political realism is irrefutable. Schmitt and Strauss are absolutely right in pointing to the fact that human beings have always lived in societies characterized by mutual hostility and antagonism. And there is no reason to think that this will ever change. But Schmitt and Strauss are not simply bringing this reality to our attention; their aim is to glorify and romanticize the political.

I think that Schmitt is right in thinking that the *other* need not be evil, but not because politics is a domain of life beyond good and evil, but because political conflicts are likely to be conflicts between mutually

incompatible goods. Political communities may represent incommensurable goods that come into conflict. But to acknowledge this is not to valorize it. On the contrary, it is a human tragedy of great proportions. It means that human life cannot escape injustice. And the political domain is assigned the task of imposing our conception of the good against others. In other words, politics must shoulder the dirty tasks that make the pursuit of the good life possible. But there is no reason to valorize politics as Strauss and Schmitt do. Nor is there any reason to pretend, as Strauss does, that the violence of politics against foreigners and outsiders is "political justice." Such obfuscations conceal the ugly truth of politics and encourage people to feel morally self-righteous in their iniquities.

By insisting on the moral autonomy of politics, Schmitt hoped to rob it of moral and religious support. And while I would applaud this position as less radical than Strauss's, it could hardly be considered moderate. Schmitt wanted people to confront a pure political enemy, without considering whether the foe was good or evil, innocent or guilty. Unfortunately, the goodness or innocence of the foe is not irrelevant. On the contrary, an innocent foe cannot be treated with excessive force without casting a dark shadow over all our endeavors, no matter how good they are when considered in abstraction. To pretend that the innocence of the foe is irrelevant is self-delusional. Politics cannot be an autonomous domain. And even if the strict principles of morality cannot apply to politics, it can never be free of moral and religious censure. Even the Nazis understood this, and it explains why they went to such great lengths and invented so many euphemisms to conceal their iniquities. They knew that their grandest plans are bound to be paltry if not utterly repellent once the evils they thought necessary to accomplish their dreams were discovered. By the same token, the Allies did not fight an altogether just war—they used tactics such as the bombing of Dresden and other German cities for the purpose of terrorizing and demoralizing unarmed civilians. Cynics may argue that the Allies went unpunished because only the vanquished are ever punished for their crimes. And those who are even more cynical may argue that history is written by the victors, and hence the war fought by the Allies was deemed to be a just war. But in truth, the best wars cannot bear too much moral scrutiny. Nor is it ignorance of Allied transgressions that accounts for the view that they fought a just war. It is precisely the

magnitude of the foe's iniquity that excuses the Allies, and crowns their efforts with approval.

Schmitt's defenders deny that Schmitt intends to romanticize war and politics. They believe that he is not so much lamenting the absence of politics, as its global proportions, which make it more lethal than it has to be. On this view, Schmitt is simply a political realist who is making the best of a bad situation. He is a champion of the "pluriverse"—a globe populated by a plurality of diverse societies that are internally homogeneous. On this view, the pluriverse is the antidote to the homogenizing forces of global capitalism, liberal freedom, and human rights.⁹²

It seems to me that the appeal of Hitler for men such as Heidegger and Schmitt had its source in the fact that Hitler appeared to be a champion of the pluriverse against the global forces of liberalism.⁹³ Of course, this turned out to be false, since Hitler had imperialist aspirations that were as global as they were homogenizing—he aspired to world dominance for the superior race. Nevertheless, in a world where nazism has been defeated militarily, communism has collapsed, and liberal capitalism is sweeping the globe, these sentiments are as germane today as ever. Many feel that the triumph of global capitalism has homogenized the globe and drained the world of uniqueness and eccentricities. By the same token, the fear of this global threat has fueled an opposite reaction—toward tribalism, nationalism, and provincialism. But heaping abuse on everything global and universal has become the fashionable hallmark of postmodernism. Strauss and Schmitt are classic examples. The trouble with this way of thinking is that it is hostile to *everything* universal. So much so that it confuses morality with imperialism, universal moral norms with normalization, and human rights with homogenization. In rejecting the global homogenization of capitalism, they reject the moral law that human beings share in common. It is therefore no surprise that Schmitt railed against the ideas of natural law as anarchical, fanatical, and destructive of the political.⁹⁴ Nor was Strauss a champion of natural law, despite his reputation to the contrary.⁹⁵ If human beings from different cultures do not share the most elementary moral principles, then diplomacy is impossible, and all disputes must be settled through war.

As we shall see in the following chapter, the American followers of Leo Strauss such as Allan Bloom and Willmoore Kendall echo the ideas

expressed by Heidegger and Schmitt. Like Heidegger, they identify American liberalism with modernity, the homelessness of man, and the disintegration of peoples; and like Schmitt, they drive a wedge between liberalism and democracy and affirm the latter while denouncing the former. They abhor the liberal demotion of politics to a mere instrument; they consider a political society healthy only when the state is at the center of life and elicits the love, devotion, and total surrender of its citizens. They detest the pluralism of American society, and long for the cohesiveness of Schmitt's total state.

CHAPTER FOUR

AMERICAN APPLICATIONS OF STRAUSSIAN PHILOSOPHY

IN THE YEAR OF THE BICENTENNIAL of the American Constitution, Gordon S. Wood wondered why the Straussians dominated nearly all of the academic conferences devoted to the study of the American founding.¹ Part of the answer is that American Straussians are generally conservative, and for conservatives, history is the truest guide to the correct political policies. This is not to say that they are historicists. On the contrary, Straussian conservatives differ from classic or conventional conservatives precisely because they deny that history is the source of truth. Unlike traditional conservatives, they know that every tradition has an origin in the art and inventiveness of great men. Traditions are therefore not as mystical as traditional conservatives generally believe. But this is no reason not to privilege the ancestral, which in this case is the American founding.

There is also another answer to Wood's question, and that has to do with the guilt involved in being conservative in America. There is an assumption, which is not without foundation, that being conservative is somehow un-American.² And if that is so, then nothing could do more to diminish the guilt of being conservative than a scholarly literature intended to show the conservatism of the American Founding Fathers. If conservative policies and ideas can be traced to the Founding Fathers, then being American and being conservative can no longer be regarded as mutually exclusive.