> then function automatically, that things would administer themselves, and that a government by people over people would be superfluous because human beings would then be absolutely free. For what would they be free? This can be answered by optimistic or pessimistic conjectures, all of which finally lead to an anthropological profession of faith.[45]

Such an artificial world requires a "religion of technicity" that has faith in the "unlimited power and dominion over nature . . . [and] in the unlimited potential for change and for happiness in the natural this-worldly existence of man."[46] For Schmitt the political theologian, this "Babylonian unity" represents a brief harmony that prefigures the final catastrophe of the Apocalypse.[47] Following the medieval tradition, Schmitt knows and fears that this artificial unity can be brought about only by the shadowy figure of the Antichrist.[48] He will surreptitiously take over the entire world at the end of human history by seducing people with the promise of "peace and security":

> God created the world; the Antichrist counterfeits it. . . . The sinister magician recreates the world, changes the face of the earth, and subdues nature. Nature serves him; for what purpose is a matter of indifference—for any satisfaction of artificial needs, for ease and comfort. Men who allow themselves to be deceived by him see only the fabulous effect; nature seems to be overcome, the age of security dawns; everything has been taken care of, a clever foresight and planning replace Providence.[49]

The world where everything seems to administer itself is the world of science fiction, of Stephenson's *Snow Crash,* or of *The Matrix* for those who choose not to take their red pills. But no representation of reality ever is the same as reality, and one must never lose sight of the larger framework within which the representation exists. The price of abandoning oneself to such an artificial representation is always too high, because the decisions that are avoided are always too important.[50] By making people forget that they have souls, the Antichrist will succeed in swindling people out of them.[51]

Leo Strauss: Proceed with Caution

We are at an impasse.

On the one hand, we have the newer project of the Enlightenment, which never became comprehensive on a global scale, and perhaps always came at

too high a price of self-stultification. On the other hand, we have a return to the older tradition, but that return is fraught with far too much violence. The incredibly drastic solutions favored by Schmitt in his dark musings have become impossible after 1945, in a world of nuclear weapons and limitless destruction through technology.

What sort of coherent intellectual or practical synthesis is then possible at all? The political philosopher Leo Strauss attempted to solve this central paradox of the postmodern world. The challenge of that task is reflected in the difficulty of Strauss's own writings, which are prohibitively obscurantist to the uninitiated. A representative and not entirely random passage can serve as an illustration: "The unity of knowledge and communication of knowledge can also be compared to the combination of man and horse, although not to a centaur."[52]

Indeed, there is little in Strauss that is more clear than the need for less transparency. Unchecked philosophizing poses great risks to philosophers (as well as the cities they inhabit), as in even the most liberal or open-minded regimes there exist certain deeply problematic truths.[53] Strauss is convinced that he is not the first to have discovered or rediscovered these truths. The great writers and philosophers of the past also had known of these matters but, in order to protect themselves from persecution, these thinkers used an "esoteric" mode of writing in which their "literature is addressed, not to all readers, but to trustworthy and intelligent readers only."[54]

As a thought experiment, Strauss invites us to consider the position of a "historian living in a totalitarian country, a generally respected and unsuspected member of the only party in existence."[55] As a result of his studies, this historian comes "to doubt the soundness of the government-sponsored interpretation of the history of religion."[56] On an exoteric level, this historian will make a passionate defense of the state-sponsored view,[57] but esoterically, between the lines, "he would write three or four sentences in that terse and lively style which is apt to arrest the attention of young men who love to think."[58] It would be enough for the attentive reader, but not enough for the invariably less intelligent government censors.[59] Alternately, our writer might even state "certain truths quite openly by using as mouthpiece some disreputable character. . . . 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."[60]

Strauss summarizes the benefits of such a strange mode of discourse:

> It has all the advantages of private communication without having its greatest disadvantage—that it reaches only the writer's acquaintances. It has all

> the advantages of public communication without having its greatest disadvantage—capital punishment for the author.[61]

Because there are books (and perhaps other writings) that "do not reveal their full meaning as intended by the author unless one ponders over them 'day and night' for a long time," cultural relativism and intellectual nihilism are not the final word.[62] Strauss believes that there exists a truth about human nature, and that this truth can in principle be known to humanity. Indeed, the great writers of the past are in far more agreement about this truth than their exoteric disagreements would lead the superficial reader to believe, "for there were more great men who were stepsons of their time or out of step with the future than one would easily believe."[63] These writers only *appeared* to conform to the diverse cities they inhabited. Strauss alludes to the dangers they faced, by reminding us of the warning Goethe had Faust deliver to his assistant: "The few who understood something of men's heart and mind, who were foolish enough not to restrain their full heart but to reveal their feeling and their vision to the vulgar, have ever been crucified and burned."[64]

* * *

There are no short cuts in Strauss. The philosopher practices what he preaches, and so one will search in vain in Strauss's writings for a systematic statement of the hidden truth. Perhaps Strauss's only incremental concession to the would-be philosopher lies in the fact that his writings are transparently esoteric and hard to understand, in contradistinction to the past writers who wrote seemingly straightforward books whose truly esoteric nature was therefore even more obscured. "The open agenda of the Straussians," declares Harvard government professor Harvey Mansfield (and himself a Straussian), is limited to "reading the Great Books for their own sake," and does not include offering dumbed-down summaries.[65]

Nevertheless, certain themes emerge and recur—the question of the city and humanity, the issues of founding and origins, and the relation between religion and the best regime. To generalize a bit more, even if one does not take one's bearings entirely from the exceptional case (as do Machiavelli and Schmitt), it is a case that must not be forgotten. An account of politics that speaks only of the smooth functioning of the machinery of government is incomplete, and one also must consider the circumstances in which this machinery is built or created in the first place—and, by extension, where it might be threatened or modified and reconstructed.[66]

When one widens the aperture of one's investigations, one will find that there are more things in heaven and Earth than dreamt of in the modern world of Locke or Montaigne. The fact that these things are hidden does not mean that they do not exist or that they are unknowable. On the problematic question of origins, for instance, Strauss notes the surprising convergence, at least on the level of factual detail, in the Roman myth of the founding of the greatest city of the ancient world and in what the book of Genesis says about the founding of the first city in the history of the world.[67]

Does Strauss then believe that "there cannot be a great and glorious society without the equivalent of the murder of Remus by his brother Romulus?"[68] At first, he seems to suggest that America is the one exception in all of history to this rule, quoting with approval the patriotic Thomas Paine: "[T]he Independence of America [was] accompanied by a Revolution in the principles and practice of Governments. . . . Government founded on a moral theory, on a system of universal peace, on the indefeasible hereditary Rights of Man, is now revolving from west to east by a stronger impulse than the Government of the sword revolved from east to west."[69] But within a few pages, we find that even in the case of the American Founding, this patriotic account is not necessarily the whole truth, and the reader is informed that perhaps "America owes her greatness not only to her habitual adherence to the principles of freedom and justice, but also to her occasional deviation from them."[70] Moreover, we are told that there exists a "mischievous interpretation of the Louisiana Purchase and of the fate of the Red Indians."[71] Indeed, the philosopher's decision to write esoterically reminds us that even in America, the most liberal regime in history, there remain politically incorrect taboos.[72]

In reminding us of the permanent problems, the political philosopher agrees with the political theologian's exhortation to seriousness and also joins the latter in rejecting as illusory the notion that "everything has been taken care of." But because the philosopher does not share all the theologian's hopes and fears, there is more freedom in steering a middle course between "the Scylla of 'absolutism' and the Charybdis of 'relativism.'"[73] As Strauss puts it, "[t]here is a universally valid hierarchy of ends, but there are no universally valid rules of action."[74]

Strauss illustrates this claim by reminding us of "an extreme situation in which the very existence or independence of a society is at stake."[75] Such an extreme situation is represented by war. What a decent society will do during war "will depend to a certain extent on what the enemy—possibly an absolutely unscrupulous and savage enemy—forces it to do."[76] As a result, "[t]here are no limits which can be defined in advance, there are no assignable

limits to what might become just reprisals."[77] And moreover: "Considerations which apply to foreign enemies may well apply to subversive elements within society."[78] The philosopher ends with a plea to "leave these sad exigencies covered with the veil with which they are justly covered."[79]

* * *

Let us recapitulate. The modern West has lost faith in itself. In the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment period, this loss of faith liberated enormous commercial and creative forces. At the same time, this loss has rendered the West vulnerable. Is there a way to fortify the modern West without destroying it altogether, a way of not throwing the baby out with the bathwater?

At first sight, Strauss seems to offer such a moderate middle course, but his path too is fraught with peril. For as soon as the theoretical esotericism of the philosopher is combined with some sort of practical implementation, self-referential problems abound: the awareness of the problematic nature of the city makes the unreflective defense of the city impossible. In this way, Strauss's recovery of the permanent problems paradoxically might make their resolution all the more difficult. Or, to frame the matter in terms of Schmitt's eschatology, the Straussian project sets out to preserve the *katechon,* but instead becomes a "hastener against its will."[80] No new Alexander is in sight to cut the Gordian knot of our age.

Moreover, a direct path forward is prevented by America's constitutional machinery. By "setting ambition against ambition" with an elaborate system of checks and balances, it prevents any single ambitious person from reconstructing the old Republic. America's founders enjoyed a freedom of action far surpassing that of America's subsequent politicians. Eventually, ambitious people would come to learn that there is little one can do in politics and that all merely political careers end in failure. The intellectual paralysis of self-knowledge has its counterpoint in the political paralysis embedded in our open system of government.

Still, there are more possibilities for action than first appear, precisely because there are more domains than those enumerated by the conventional legal or juridical system. Roberto Calasso reminds us of the alternative thread in *The Ruin of Kasch:*

> The period between 1945 and the present could conceivably be rendered in two parallel histories: that of the historians, with its elaborate apparatus of parameters, discussing figures, masses, parties, movements, negotiations,

> productions; and that of the secret services, telling of murders, traps, betrayals, assassinations, cover-ups, and weapons shipments. We know that both accounts are insufficient, that both claim to be self-sufficient, that one could never be translated into the other, and that they will continue their parallel lives. But hasn't this perhaps always been the case . . . ?[81]

Strauss also reminds us of the exceptional framework needed to supplement the American regime: "The most just society cannot survive without 'intelligence,' i.e., espionage," even though "[e]spionage is impossible without a suspension of certain rules of natural right."[82] Again, there is no disagreement with Tennyson on ends, but only on means. Instead of the United Nations, filled with interminable and inconclusive parliamentary debates that resemble Shakespearean tales told by idiots, we should consider Echelon, the secret coordination of the world's intelligence services, as the decisive path to a truly global *pax Americana.*

Liberal critics who disagree with the philosopher also tend to dislike the philosopher's politics. Just as there appears to be something shaky and problematic about a theoretical framework that is not subject to the give and take of open debate, so there appears to be something subversive and immoral about a political framework that operates outside the checks and balances of representative democracy as described in high school textbooks; but if American liberalism is decisively incomplete, then its critique is no longer quite so decisive. For the Straussian, there can be no fundamental disagreement with Oswald Spengler's call for action at the dramatic finale of *Der Untergang des Abendlandes:*

> Für uns aber, die ein Schicksal in diese Kultur und diesen Augenblick ihres Werdens gestellt hat, in welchem das Geld seine letzten Siege feiert und sein Erbe, der Cäsarismus, leise und unaufhaltsam naht, ist damit in einem eng unschriebenen Kreise die Richtung des Wollens und Müssens gegeben, ohne das es sich nicht zu leben lohnt. Wir haben nicht die Freiheit, dies oder jenes zu erreichen, aber die, das Notwendige zu tun oder nichts. Und eine Aufgabe, welche die Notwendigkeit der Geschichte gestellt hat, *wird* gelöst, mit dem einzelnen oder gegen ihn.
>
> *Ducunt fata volentem, nolentem trahunt.*[83]

René Girard: The End of the City of Man

In spite of the inspiring sweep of the Straussian project, there remains a nagging suspicion that perhaps it is missing something fundamental altogether. And if the French literary theorist René Girard is even partially correct in his extraordinary account of the history of the world, then the Straussian moment of triumph may prove to be brief indeed.

In important ways, the Girardian analysis of the modern West echoes some of the themes already discussed. As with Schmitt and Strauss, Girard also believes that there exists a disturbing truth about the city and humanity, and that the whole issue of human violence has been whitewashed away by the Enlightenment. Moreover, there will come an hour when this truth is completely known: "No single question has more of a future today than the question of man."[84] The possibility of moving beyond the unknowable human "X" of John Locke and the eighteenth-century rationalists had already been implicit in the entire project of evolutionary science during the nineteenth century.[85] Just as Darwin's *The Origin of Species* transformed the natural sciences, some other writer's *The Origin of Religions* will provide the logical and chronological sequel and one day transform the sciences of humanity.[86]

For Girard, this post-Darwinian account must somehow combine the gradualism of Darwinian evolution with the essentialism of the pre-Darwinians, stressing both the continuity and discontinuity of humanity with the rest of the natural order. This more comprehensive account of human nature will be centered on an insight already contained in Aristotelian biology: "Man differs from the other animals in his greater aptitude for imitation."[87] Here one has both a difference of kind and one of degree, which can provide the basis for a synthesis between Aristotle and Darwin. Such a synthesis and relationship was already hinted at in the time of Shakespeare, when the word "ape" already meant both "primate" and "to imitate."

However, the new science of humanity must drive the idea of imitation, or mimesis, much further than it has in the past. According to Girard, all cultural institutions, beginning with the acquisition of language by children from their parents, require this sort of mimetic activity, and so it is not overly reductionist to describe human brains as gigantic imitation machines. Because humanity would not exist without imitation, one cannot say that there is something wrong with imitation per se or that those humans who imitate others are somehow inferior to those humans who do not. The latter group, according to Girard, simply does not exist—even though it remains the most