

Prof. L. Zerilli

**Strauss and Weber:  
Value Pluralism, Relativism, and the Crisis of Modern Rationalism and  
Liberalism**

They [liberals] appear to believe that our inability to acquire any genuine knowledge of what is intrinsically good or right compels us to be tolerant of every opinion about good or right or to recognize all preferences or all ‘civilizations’ as equally respectable. Only unlimited tolerance is in accordance with reason.

--Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, p. 5

A central tenet of modern liberalism is that diverse and often conflicting values or worldviews exist which form the basis of a liberal democratic polity. What the neo-Kantian John Rawls calls “comprehensive doctrines” (religious, philosophical, and moral) are characterized at once by incompatibility and reasonability. Because people who deliberate about moral and political questions emphasize different aspects of questions and employ different methods, they will come to different and irreconcilable answers. Rawls calls this fact of human reason the ‘burdens of judgment,’ and emphasizes that it is an irreducible feature of liberal democratic societies. According to him, such pluralism need not lead defenders of liberal values to despair: a conception of political justice can be rationally worked out that this plurality of reasonable doctrines would endorse. Needless to say, not all theorists of value pluralism have been so optimistic. In the famous view of Max Weber, perhaps the first social theorist to recognize value pluralism as a definitive feature of modernity, “ultimate values” cannot be adjudicated by social science, philosophy, or any other exercise of human reason, for they are fundamentally groundless. All claims to absolute truth and knowledge rest not on evident premises but on faith. Science itself cannot provide a justification of its own value. If value conflicts cannot be mediated through science and the normal exercise of human reason, on what basis could one affirm the value of value pluralism, not to mention liberty and equality, as the normative condition of liberal democracy? This is the central question that Weber’s work raised for deeply ambivalent liberals such as Leo Strauss. The survival of liberal democracy demands that value conflicts be resolved through the exercise of human reason, Strauss argues. The thinkers who show us the way, however, are those for whom value pluralism was not the irreducible feature of political life, namely, Aristotle and the ancients, not Kant and the moderns. “To judge soundly, one must know the true standards,” writes Strauss. But where are these true standards to be found—in Athens or Jerusalem?

**Course Requirements:**

Each of you will take responsibility for opening one week of class discussion. This is not a formal, written presentation but an oral roadmap that guides our inquiry. In addition, each of you will send me and other seminar participants a one paragraph description of the central problem that the reading raises for you and that you wish to discuss in class. This can include passages of text and should be sent via email by noon each Wed. A final paper (10-12 pages) is due by March 10<sup>th</sup> (via email:l-zerilli@northwestern.edu).

### **Required Texts:**

These texts have been ordered through the university bookstore, but they are also available (used and/or cheaper) through an online source. Some of the articles are available online through electronic resources. It is your responsibility to download them. Articles that are not so available will be near the xerox machine in the sixth floor lounge of Scott Hall.

Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago, 1965)

Leo Strauss, *An Introduction to Political Philosophy* (Wayne State, 1989)

Leo Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (Chicago, 1997)

Max Weber, *Essential Weber*, ed. Sam Whimster (Routledge, 2003)

Max Weber, *Weber: Selections in Translation*, ed. W. G. Runciman (Cambridge, 1978)

### **Recommended Texts:**

J.C. Alexander, *The Classical Attempt at Theoretical Synthesis: Max Weber* (Berkeley, 1982), 3 volumes.

Nasser Behnegar, *Leo Strauss, Max Weber, and the Scientific Study of Politics* (Chicago, 2003).

J. Ciaffa, *Max Weber and the Problem of a Value-Free Social Science: A Critical Examination of Werurteilstreit* (Associated Univ. Press, 1998)

Shadia Drury, *Leo Strauss and the American Right* (St. Martin's, 1997)

Shadia Drury, *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss* (MacMillan, 2005 [1988])

John Gunnell, *The Descent of Political Theory: The Genealogy of an American Vocation* (Chicago, 1993).

Asher Horowitz and Terry Maley, eds., *The Barbarism of Reason: Max Weber and the Twilight of Enlightenment* (Toronto, 1994).

P. G. Kielmansegg, H. Mewes, E. Glaser-Schmidt, eds. *Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss: German Emigres and American Political Thought After World War II* (Cambridge, 1997).

Basit Bilal Koshul, *The Postmodern Significance of Weber's Legacy* (Palgrave, 2005).

Laurence Lampert, *Leo Strauss and Nietzsche* (Chicago, 1997)

Heinrich Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem* (Cambridge UP, 2006). [*Das theologisch-politische Problem* (J. B. Metzler, 2003).]

\_\_\_\_\_, *Die Denkbewegung von Leo Strauss* (J.B. Metzler, 1996).

\_\_\_\_\_, *Carl Schmitt, Leo Strauss und "Der Begriff des Politischen"* (J.B. Metzler, 1988).

Ann Norton, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of American Empire* (Yale UP, 2004)

Leo Strauss, "Note on the Plan of Nietzsche's Beyond Good and Evil," in Strauss, *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*

Leo Strauss, "Exoteric Teaching," in *The Rebirth of Classical Rationalism*

Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*

Daniel Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography* (Yale UP, 2007)

Fritz Ringer, *Max Weber's Methodology: The Unification of the Cultural and Social Sciences* (Harvard, 1977)

**(An asterisk denotes required reading)**

### **I. The New Political Science and Its Discontents**

\* John G. Gunnell, "American Political Science, Liberalism, and the Invention of

Political Theory,” *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 82, No. 1. (Mar., 1988), pp. 71-87. (Available online through electronic resources.)

- \* Leo Strauss, “Epilogue,” in *An Introduction to Political Philosophy*, 125-156.
- \* Peter Lassman, “Political Theory in an Age of Disenchantment: The Problem of Value Pluralism: Weber, Berlin, Rawls,” in *Max Weber Studies* 4, no. 2 (2004): 253-271 (xerox)

Recommended:

John Schaar and Sheldon Wolin, “Essays on the Scientific Study of Politics: A Critique,” *The American Political Science Review* 57, no. 1 (March 1963): 125-150. (Available online through electronic resources.)

Leo Strauss et al., “Replies to Schaar and Wolin,” *The American Political Science Review* 57, no. 1 (March 1963): 151-160. (Available online through electronic resources.)

Nasser Behnegar, *Leo Strauss, Max Weber, and the Scientific Study of Politics*, ch. 1, 6-9. *Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss: German Emigres and American Political Thought After World War II*, Part II.

## **II. Historicism, Liberalism, and the Problem of Relativism**

- \* Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” in *Liberty: Incorporating Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford, 2002). (xerox)
- \* Leo Strauss, “Social Science and Humanism” and “Relativism,” in *The Rebirth of Classical Rationalism* (Chicago, 1989). (xerox)
- \* \_\_\_\_\_, “Natural Right and the Historical Approach,” in *An Introduction to Political Philosophy*, 99-124.
- \* \_\_\_\_\_, “What is Political Philosophy?” and “On Classical Political Philosophy” in *An Introduction to Political Philosophy*

Recommended:

Leo Strauss, “Political Philosophy and History,” in *What is Political Philosophy?* (Chicago, 1988).

Nasser Behnegar, *Leo Strauss, Max Weber, and the Scientific Study of Politics*, ch. 2  
Isaiah Berlin, “Alleged Relativism in Eighteenth-Century European Thought,” in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (Princeton UP, [1959] 1990)

Isaiah Berlin, “Does Political Theory Still Exist?”

\_\_\_\_\_, “Rationality of Value Judgments,” *Nomos* 7 [Carl J. Friedrich (ed.), *Rational Decision* (New York, 1964: Atherton Press; London, 1964: Prentice-Hall International)], 221–3

## **III. Weber on Meaning, Values, and the Limits of Scientific Reason (2 weeks)**

- \* Max Weber, “Basic Sociological Concepts,” in *Essential Weber*
- \* \_\_\_\_\_, “The Nature of Social Action,” in *Weber: Selections in Translation*
- \* \_\_\_\_\_, “The Logic of Historical Explanation,” in *Weber: Selections in Translation*

Recommended:

J. Ciaffa, *Max Weber and the Problem of a Value-Free Social Science: A Critical Examination of Werurteilstreit*

J.C. Alexander, *The Classical Attempt at Theoretical Synthesis: Max Weber*

## **IV. Continued...**

- \*Weber, "Value Judgments in Social Science," in *Selections in Translation*
- \* \_\_\_\_\_, "The 'objectivity' of knowledge in social science and social policy," in \_\_\_\_\_ *Essential Weber*
- \* \_\_\_\_\_, "The Vocation of Science," in *Essential Weber*
- \* \_\_\_\_\_, "The Vocation of Politics," in *Selections in Translation*

Recommended:

Basit Bilal Koshul, *The Postmodern Significance of Weber's Legacy*.  
 Fritz Ringer, *Max Weber's Methodology*.

**V. Strauss's Answer to the Weberian Critique: Natural Right Theory**

- \*Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History*

Recommended:

Behnegar, *Leo Strauss, Max Weber and the Scientific Study of Politics*, Part II.  
 John Haldane, "Natural Law and Ethical Pluralism," in *The Many and the One*, 89-114.  
 Joseph Boyler, "Natural Law Reflections on the Social Management of Ethical Pluralism," in *The Many and the One*

**VI. The "Theologico-Political Problem" (2 weeks)**

- \*Weber, *The Essential Weber*, Part I, pp. 11-113.
- \*Weber, "Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions," in *From Max Weber*, ed. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (Oxford UP, 1946) (xerox)

Recommended

Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*  
 \_\_\_\_\_, *The Sociology of Religion* (Beacon, 1991)

**VII. Continued...**

- \*Leo Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*
- \* \_\_\_\_\_, "Preface to Spinoza's Critique of Religion," in *Liberalism, Ancient and Modern*
- \* \_\_\_\_\_, "Jerusalem and Athens: Some Introductory Reflections," *Commentary* 43, no. 6 (June 1967): 45-57. (Available through electronic resources.)

Recommended:

Steven Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss: Politics, Philosophy, Judaism* (Chicago, 2006)  
 \_\_\_\_\_, *Spinoza, Liberalism, and the Question of Jewish Identity* (Yale UP, 1997)  
 Leo Strauss, *Philosophy and Law: Contributions to the Understanding of Maimonides and His Predecessors* (SUNY, 1995)

**VIII. Revisiting the Liberal Settlement of Ultimate Value Conflicts (2 weeks)**

- \*John Rawls, "Justice as Fairness" *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 67, No. 2. (April, 1958), pp. 164-194.
- \* \_\_\_\_\_, "Justice as Fairness: Political Not Metaphysical," in *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 14 (Summer 1985): 223-51.
- \* \_\_\_\_\_, "The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus," in *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 7 (Spring 1987): 1-25.

Recommended

\_\_\_\_\_, *A Theory of Justice* (Harvard, 1971)  
 \_\_\_\_\_, *Political Liberalism*, (Columbia, 1993).

Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (Cornell, 1993)  
Ayelet Shachar, *Multicultural Jurisdictions: Cultural Differences and Women's Rights*  
(Cambridge, 2001)

**IX. Continued**

\*Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (Cambridge 1991), selections (xerox).

Recommended:

Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country* (Harvard, 1999)

\_\_\_\_\_, *Take Care of Freedom and Truth Will Take Care of Itself* (Stanford, 2005)

Linda Zerilli, "Wittgenstein: Between Pragmatism and Deconstruction," in *The Legacy of Wittgenstein: Pragmatism or Deconstruction*, ed. Ludwig Nagel and Chantal Mouffe (Vienna, 2001).