

A Symposium on Timothy W. Burns’s *Leo Strauss on Democracy, Technology, and Liberal Education*

Mark Lutz, Rodrigo Chacón, Daniel Tanguay, and Susan Shell, with a response by Timothy W. Burns

Timothy W. Burns: *Leo Strauss on Democracy, Technology, and Liberal Education*. (New York: State University of New York Press, 2021. Pp. 201.)

Introduction

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doi:10.1017/S0034670522000997

Leo Strauss’s thoughts about liberalism are controversial, partly because few agree about what they are. Some consider him an inveterate opponent of liberalism, while others claim that he regards liberal democracy as a modern approximation of the classical best regime. These incongruous readings are possible because Strauss places tremendous demands on his readers. He tends to comment on other thinkers’ works, expressing his own thoughts in passing, leaving it to the careful, intelligent reader to think through their full implications. Timothy Burns is such a reader, and his brilliant new book renders a tremendous service to those who study Strauss and those who study liberalism. Burns focuses on what Strauss says in his own name about both liberal democracy and the spiritual crisis of our age, and he sheds new, bold light on Strauss’s thinking about the crisis facing liberal democracy as well as on how that crisis might be met.

Burns focuses on four of Strauss’s works on liberalism and liberal education: “What is Liberal Education?” (1961), “Liberal Education and Responsibility” (1962), a lecture called “German Nihilism” delivered in

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1941 at the New School for Social Research, and a review of Eric A. Havelock's *The Liberal Temper in Greek Politics*, published in 1959.¹ Through a careful and extensively annotated exegesis, Burns reveals that Strauss agrees with much of Martin Heidegger's thinking about technology and its destructive effects. Strauss finds that technology dissolves prephilosophic moral horizons, so we have "lost all simply authoritative traditions in which we could trust" (32). Burns shows that Strauss would not, like Heidegger, cast liberal democracy aside or call for some New Thinking. Instead, Strauss directs our attention to the edifying powers of a certain kind of liberal education. He indicates how a liberal education rooted in the Great Books could help to form a sub-political, cultural aristocracy that could elevate liberal culture and moderate modern politics.

Burns explains that while Strauss looks to a liberal education rooted in the Great Books to lend liberal democracy new moral ballast and direction, he does not believe that classical philosophy, as such, can play a role in our politics. Because the philosophers recognize the "corruptibility of all human achievements" (96), they do not share in all the nonphilosophers' moral visions and aspirations. They cannot supply us with direct moral and political guidance. Philosophy can, however, give us inspiring examples of a higher way of life or of what Burns calls a "noble activity that is good in itself" (177). Thanks to Burns's most assiduous reading, we discover a Strauss who is not a political partisan of philosopher-kings, elite cadres, or vigorous re-founders of the regime but a supporter of a liberalism that is leavened by our spiritual heritage and by the moral tradition found in the Great Books.

Commentary

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doi:10.1017/S0034670522001012

Burns has written an excellent book on the contemporary importance of Strauss. Speaking as someone who has read Strauss through different lenses, I found it both provocative and deeply instructive. To begin with

¹The lecture was later published in *Interpretation* 26, no. 3 (Spring 1999): 353–78; the other three pieces can be found in Strauss's *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), chaps. 1–3.