

Interpretation

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Leo Strauss in Italy: The “Three Waves” of Italian Strauss Studies*

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Over the past two and a half decades, the academic literature on Leo Strauss has been growing significantly. Scholars from North America, Europe, China, and Latin America have been contributing dozens of books, articles, and papers every year. And this enthusiasm is gaining momentum, as a rapid glance at any catalog will show. The days when Strauss was an author read by a relatively small group of political philosophers and historians of Jewish thought appear to be gone for good. Today, Strauss is finally recognized by a larger audience as a philosopher in his own right, and he is read by an ever-growing number of students and scholars. And, of course, the demand for new and comprehensive research is increasing accordingly. Among the most prolific and active contributors to the study of Strauss’s thought are, without a doubt, Italian academics. To cite one example, no fewer than sixty-four volumes on Strauss have appeared in the Western world in the last ten years alone (2008–2018); ten of them were written by Italian scholars. What sets the Italians apart is the relatively large amount of research they publish, the depth of their knowledge of the thinker in question, and the multifaceted variety of their philosophical approaches. However, owing to the linguistic divide, the greater part of their lively and original production remains, for all practical purposes, within the limits of the Italian-speaking academic world.

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Given the growing interest in Strauss's thought shown by so many scholars around the world, it seems apt to map a *terra incognita*—to write the history of what has been produced by Italian scholars. Hence, this article discusses eighteen monographs on Strauss, as well as a few seminal essays, published in Italy since 1983.

The primary thing to be observed about the study of Strauss in Italy is the absence of a school. In contrast to the North American academic world, in which at least two major trends had been thriving for some decades (the so-called West Coast and East Coast Straussians; see below), Italian scholars have worked autonomously, and have been absolutely extraneous to the ideological and political climate that has so heavily conditioned the mainstream debate on the figure of Strauss and, notably, the careers of some scholars. Perhaps the main reason for the absence of a school is the fact that Strauss had no Italian pupils. Strauss's Italian acquaintances were few and isolated; their sporadic attempts at communication were to no avail. Besides this, no Italian philosopher entertained a dialogue with Strauss as Alexandre Kojève did; Strauss did not comment on contemporary Italian thinkers as he did on Carl Schmitt and Martin Heidegger. The bridge with Italian culture was built only posthumously, for there was no preexisting Straussian "tradition" or "encounter" that could somehow guide the interpretation "from within" (this, as far as I know, applies also to the Chinese and Latin American academic worlds). In any case, the struggle of the Italian scholars to get hold of such an original thinker was successful. In the following, I will argue that, while the first encounter was characterized by an almost total dismissal of Strauss's thought, the later flourishing of interest contributed to the building of a solid Straussian scholarship, however diversified. As I recount in the second and third sections of this article, the Italian studies are so manifold and varied that they reflect, like a prism, almost all the different aspects of Strauss's thought. Today, such an abundance of views appears to be retrospectively unified by a shared opinion which, I believe, confers a clear and distinctive trait to the contemporary Italian Straussian movement. In order to delineate this distinct cultural and philosophical trait in a nutshell, I offer a formula used by Carlo Altini to describe Strauss's project: Strauss is a philosopher who transformed the history of political philosophy into an instrument of philosophical inquiry strictly understood. As will become evident from the discussion of the books and essays, Italian scholars have been enthralled by Strauss's ability to discuss philosophic issues by reading works belonging to the past. This approach is something these scholars surely learned from Strauss, but also something which, although in a different form, was already

present in their culture: the utmost consideration for the traditional canon, namely, the Great Books. Today, Strauss is understood as a thinker who revived the study of the history of philosophy as a truly philosophical pursuit aimed at the articulation of perennial, and not just contingent or culture-related, problems. Breaking the spell of the dominating philosophical trends and reaching this shared comprehension required the hard work of two generations of scholars.

1. AT FIRST, DECADES OF DIFFIDENCE (1950S–1970S)

Despite its relatively early encounter with Strauss's work, the Italian academic community initially reacted largely with skepticism. The main reasons for this reaction can be traced to the philosophical trends dominating Italian social and political thought in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Broadly speaking, Italy's politico-philosophical intelligentsia looked up to three major schools of thought: historicism, social science positivism, and Marxism. The dominating intellectual authorities were figures such as Benedetto Croce, Max Weber, Antonio Gramsci, and, of course, Karl Marx. One of the few points all three schools agreed on was that the project of political philosophy in general, as well as the doctrine of natural right in particular, belonged to the past. It is not surprising that Strauss's work did not find fruitful ground in Italy and was almost universally met with silent hostility or outspoken disinterest. Raimondo Cubeddu, who wrote a detailed account of the early years of Strauss's reception among Italian scholars, shows that Strauss's sweeping critique of Max Weber remained practically unheard, and that Strauss's rejection of historicism and his warning against forsaking natural right were met with a "deep silence": "in those years... Strauss's works and issues appeared difficult, outlandish, and unintelligible. Every commonplace of Italian politico-philosophical culture was put into question, directly or indirectly."¹

Early reviews of *Natural Right and History*² were reserved at best and in some cases openly dismissive. For example, the influential philosopher of law Guido Fassò maintained that Strauss's book—which he dubbed a "historiographico-philosophical *monstrum*"³—did not even deserve a translation. Other reviewers, such as the political philosopher Norberto Bobbio and the historian of philosophy Pietro Rossi, were not quite as harsh, but certainly

¹ Raimondo Cubeddu, "Strauss in Italia," *Il Politico* 71 (2006): 64.

² Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953).

³ Guido Fassò, "Che cosa intendiamo con 'diritto naturale,'" in *Scritti di filosofia del diritto*, vol. 2 (Milan: Giuffrè, 1982), 50n.

lacked all enthusiasm. Bobbio admitted that the plan of *Natural Right and History* was not “very clear,” and questioned why Strauss failed to point out which “maxims were to be considered indisputably right by nature.”⁴ Rossi, concentrating on Strauss’s criticism of historicism, lamented Strauss’s reduction of historicism to a sort of “Spenglerian” relativism. According to Rossi, such a relativism would be “a pure and simple deviation...from the fundamental orientation of contemporary historicism.”⁵ Interestingly enough, there seems to have been no reaction by Catholic thinkers, who represented another major current of the Italian intellectual scene, notwithstanding the fact that they could have formed a common front with Strauss against positivism and relativism.

At the time, the Italian thinker who showed the greatest interest in Strauss’s work was Bruno Leoni, who had met Strauss at least twice in the United States, once in 1953 and again in 1961. In Italy, Leoni was an outsider in more than one way. Not only was he a philosopher of law who supported value-free social science with original arguments, he was also a libertarian thinker in his own right. Leoni recognized Strauss’s exceptionality and did not attempt to reduce his thought to the categories common to Italian academic life. In 1956, Leoni published a translation of the first lecture from the “What Is Political Philosophy?” series in the journal *Il Politico*.⁶ Leoni presented Strauss as the author of “fundamental essays on Hobbes, on the relation between natural right and historicism, and, lately, on Machiavelli,” and stressed that Strauss’s recovery of classical political philosophy, “while strongly polemical and, perhaps, irredeemably in contrast with the very criteria which inspire this journal, deserve close examination.”⁷ A year later, Leoni himself published a close examination in the form of a dense rejoinder to Strauss’s critique of Weberian value-free social science.⁸ Leoni dubbed Strauss a *rare bird* for the fact that he admitted value judgments in political science—in contrast to the American and Anglo-Saxon tendency to exclude moral evaluations as unscientific—and traced this aspect to Strauss’s European background.⁹

⁴ Norberto Bobbio, “Sul diritto naturale,” *Rivista di Filosofia* 45 (1954): 429, 432–34.

⁵ Pietro Rossi, “Recensione di L. Strauss, *Natural Right and History*,” *Rivista di Filosofia* 45 (1954): 460.

⁶ Leo Strauss, “Che cosa è la filosofia politica?,” *Il Politico* 21 (1956): 359–73.

⁷ Bruno Leoni, “Premessa,” *Il Politico* 21 (1956): 359.

⁸ Bruno Leoni, “Giudizi di valore e scienza politica: Risposta al Professor Strauss,” *Il Politico* 22 (1957): 86–94; this paper was originally presented in Manchester at the Social Science Club.

⁹ See *ibid.*, 87.

In the 1960s and early 1970s, interest in Strauss increased somewhat, mostly thanks to the first translation of *On Tyranny* (1968).¹⁰ In those years, a few sympathetic articles appeared by Francesco Mercadante,¹¹ Pier Franco Taboni,¹² and, most notably, by the historian Arnaldo Momigliano, who was also an acquaintance of Strauss's. Momigliano's insightful article "Ermeneutica e pensiero politico classico in Leo Strauss" (Hermeneutics and classical political thought in Leo Strauss) (1967),¹³ which is still quoted regularly today, attempts to characterize Strauss as a philosopher and to understand his relationship to Judaism. After originally having admitted his bewilderment regarding "Jerusalem and Athens"¹⁴ ("the contrast between reason... and revelation... appears to be exasperated; the implications, to me, remain unclear"),¹⁵ Momigliano, ten years later, in an *aggiunta* (afterthought) (1977) to his article, seems to have reached a conclusion: He describes Strauss's position as "the secret position of the philosopher *within* Judaism... who speaks of reason in the world of faith; who advocates reason on behalf of those who respect and comprehend faith, but do not endorse it. Ultimately, this was the secret position adopted by Leo Strauss, a disciple of Maimonides."¹⁶ Still, these were practically isolated voices.

2. STRAUSS AND THE CRISIS OF MODERN POLITICAL THOUGHT IN ITALY

It was not until the early 1980s that the situation in Italy changed noticeably. The newfound interest in Strauss was caused by the need for a thinker capable of offering a new narrative on the epochal break effected by modernity. Finally, Strauss's approach would open a new horizon following the

¹⁰ Leo Strauss, *La tirannide: Saggio sul "Gerone" di Senofonte*, ed. Francesco Mercadante (Milan: Giuffrè, 1968).

¹¹ Francesco Mercadante, "Leo Strauss e il neostoricismo," *Rivista internazionale di filosofia del diritto* 45 (1968): 603–8; Francesco Mercadante, "Il tiranno finale e universale: Leo Strauss tra gli antichi e i moderni," in *La democrazia plebiscitaria* (Milan: Giuffrè, 1974), 155–88.

¹² Pier Franco Taboni, "Che cos'è la filosofia politica?," *Studi Urbinati di storia, filosofia e letteratura* 48 (1974): 191–220. In 1977 Taboni also published a collection of Strauss's essays under the same title: Leo Strauss, *Che cos'è la filosofia politica? Scritti su Hobbes e altri saggi*, ed. Pier Franco Taboni (Urbino: Argalia, 1977).

¹³ Arnaldo Momigliano, "Ermeneutica e pensiero politico classico in Leo Strauss," *Rivista storica italiana* 79 (1967): 1164–72; later reissued with an afterthought in Strauss, *Che cos'è la filosofia politica?*, 7–21. I will refer to the second, expanded version of the essay.

¹⁴ Leo Strauss, "Jerusalem and Athens: Some Introductory Reflections," *Commentary* 43 (1967): 45–57.

¹⁵ Momigliano, "Ermeneutica e pensiero politico classico in Leo Strauss," 19n22.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

intellectual collapse of Marxism and other philosophies of history. In this context, what gained more attention than anything else was the unmodern aspect of Strauss's enterprise. Strauss was perceived mainly as a thinker who exposed the structural limits of liberalism or, more generally, of modern political science. The first real impact of Strauss's thought in Italy appears to have been facilitated by his attempt to "return" to classical thought and by his "recovery" of ancient political philosophy. Strauss was seen by his first Italian readers as someone who could help them break out of the confines of their intellectual milieu, which at the time felt outdated and unable to offer fresh perspectives for the analysis of the spiritual and political moment. In general, the interest in Strauss was part of a broader movement of the renewal of political thought, driven by the urgency to break the shell of a modern tradition that was rapidly becoming obsolete.

The scholars who studied Strauss in this phase each came from a different corner of Italy's intellectual scene; each, before encountering Strauss, had already developed a position of his own in political science or political philosophy; they approached his works with questions which were partially born elsewhere. The great originality and plurality of the early studies on Strauss were the result of some sort of positive "contamination": Strauss was read, from time to time, by researchers who had come up studying, for example, the Austrian School, ancient political thought, conceptual history, political science, or history of philosophy. Some common traits are nonetheless easily recognizable. The first is the aforementioned deep-felt perception of the crisis of liberalism and modern political thought. The self-destruction of modernity is the interpretive frame in which Strauss initially became relevant, and some of these early studies offered an image of Strauss as an almost monolithic antimodern thinker. The aspects of Strauss's thought which appeared simply odd and bizarre in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s were appreciated in the 1980s and 1990s, even if they were not always embraced. Strauss was presented as a philosopher of natural right and as a radical critic of modernity; the champion of the forgotten art of reading and an authoritative interpreter of Thomas Hobbes. But, most importantly, he was understood as the thinker who restored the possibility of political philosophy understood as the philosophical treatment of political things. Indeed, many scholars and political thinkers found Strauss's critique of modernity helpful in reestablishing a political science that could free itself from the shackles of relativism and become, once again, the lodestar of the social sciences. Other themes of his work remained, for the time being, in the background.

The second trait common to the Italian scholars who were interested in Strauss in the 1980s is their attempt to grasp Strauss's thought as a whole. While they concentrated, from time to time, on specific aspects of Strauss's work, they studied all of his books and offered a comprehensive picture of his teaching. In fact, given the almost total extraneousness, at the time, of Strauss's peculiar categories from the philosophical debate, these scholars were forced to conceive an effective way to introduce this rare bird into Italian philosophical culture, placing him in a broader constellation alongside philosophical figures who, like Voegelin or Arendt, were already gaining some popularity in academic circles. Until the early 2000s, Strauss was not broadly recognized as a philosopher in his own right; to many, he was merely a great interpreter or historian of political philosophy. The main difficulty faced by the first generation of Straussian scholars in Italy was establishing that Strauss was a philosopher, and not merely a brilliant, yet controversial, German-American professor of political science. This fact partly explains the concentration on some of his most iconic books, such as *Natural Right and History*, *On Tyranny*, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, and *What Is Political Philosophy?* (which appeared quite early in Italian translation as well in 1957, 1968, 1973 and 1977, respectively),¹⁷ and the success of Strauss's most striking claims: the radical distinction between ancients and moderns, the self-destruction of modern rationalism in the form of positivism and historicism, and the necessity of a return to classical natural right or premodern political thought.

A. RAIMONDO CUBEDDU'S FASCINATION WITH STRAUSS'S CRITICISM OF MODERN POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

In 1983, Raimondo Cubeddu, who had previously written a study on Karl Popper and the problem of historicism, published *Leo Strauss e la filosofia politica moderna* (Leo Strauss and modern political philosophy). Cubeddu's study is the first monograph in any language entirely devoted to Strauss, whom he called "one of the most fascinating contemporary political philosophers."¹⁸ The book focuses on Strauss's criticism of modern political philosophy and its decay as manifested in contemporary thought, namely, historicism and scientism. Although Cubeddu is sympathetic to Strauss's

¹⁷ Leo Strauss, *Diritto naturale e storia* (Venice: Neri Pozza, 1957); Leo Strauss, *La tirannide* (see note 10 above); Leo Strauss, *Liberalismo antico e moderno* (Milan: Giuffrè, 1973); Leo Strauss, *Che cos'è la filosofia politica?* (see note 12 above).

¹⁸ Raimondo Cubeddu, *Leo Strauss e la filosofia politica moderna* (Naples: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 1983), 9.

critique, his point of view is not that of what one would call a “Straussian.” Cubeddu takes seriously the challenge posed to the modern project by Strauss’s return to the ancients, but he does so with a purpose of his own. Cubeddu, who as a thinker is very close to the Austrian School (whose main representatives are Carl Menger, Ludwig von Mises, and Friedrich A. von Hayek), sees Strauss primarily as a powerful “potential falsifier,”¹⁹ a sort of test case which is too challenging to be overlooked by anyone who is interested in modern political philosophy. Cubeddu’s central question is the following: Is Austrian liberalism able to resist Strauss’s sweeping critique of modernity? According to Cubeddu’s reconstruction, Strauss’s critical account of modern political philosophers offers a charming, though puzzling, history of the “diabolical” attempt to solve the political problem by merely human means. One of the puzzles Cubeddu identifies is the absence of an actual treatment of Christian political thought, for he cannot believe that Strauss “could have met the problem represented by Christianity...for the origin of modern political philosophy, with a few pages on Aquinas.”²⁰ According to Cubeddu, a closer confrontation with those Christian thinkers who found it necessary to break with the tradition would have given Strauss the opportunity to understand the now decaying modernity as a secularized version of Gnosticism. Likewise, Strauss’s notion of historicism strikes Cubeddu as enigmatic. Cubeddu, who following Strauss believes that a radical critique of historicism is necessary in order to recover the possibility of a genuine political philosophy, maintains that Strauss practically contrived too vague a concept of historicism, combining “different trends of thought which share very few affinities.”²¹ His polemical attitude towards historical thought exposes Strauss to the risk of essentialism, and therefore of being ineffective on a practical level.²² Accordingly, Strauss’s tentative return to the classical doctrine of natural right is highly perplexing to Cubeddu. He emphasizes the fact that the teleological notion of nature, on which classical natural right seems to be based, has been disproved by modern natural science.²³ And since “Strauss says nothing about the real effectiveness” of classical natural right, and “does not even say whether its realization has ever been attempted,

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 193; cf. 12.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 57–58.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 147.

²² Cf. *ibid.*, 253–54, 314.

²³ Cf. *ibid.*, 91, 95.

and, if so, with what results,”²⁴ Cubeddu raises the question whether Strauss’s “return” is, in truth, nothing more than a rhetorical appeal to moderation or even a mere “warning cry.”²⁵ The main conclusion of Cubeddu’s book can be summarized as follows: Strauss’s critique of modernity applies successfully only to the political thought that stems from Hobbes, which can be labeled “constructivism.” It is this trend of thought that would eventually usher in scientism and historicism. Another trend, which can be traced back to Mandeville and the Scottish Enlightenment, appears to survive Strauss’s indictment. According to Cubeddu, the second trend would eventually reach its full theoretical consistency in the teaching of the Austrian School, whose ability to recognize tyranny as a danger coeval with man makes it a viable alternative to the relativistic drift of modern political science.

B. TRANSCENDING THOMAS HOBBS: GIUSEPPE DUSO,
CARLO GALLI, MARIO PICCININI

Five years later, in 1988, a second major contribution to the Italian study of the work of Leo Strauss appeared, namely, *Filosofia politica e pratica del pensiero: Eric Voegelin, Leo Strauss, Hannah Arendt* (Political philosophy and the practice of thought: Eric Voegelin, Leo Strauss, Hannah Arendt), a collection of essays edited by Giuseppe Duso, who, like Cubeddu, was inspired by Strauss’s critique of contemporary social science, but who adopted a different approach. The collection deals with three attempts to transcend the paradigm of political science in the twentieth century. To explain the underlying approach of the volume, Duso’s introduction highlights the crisis of Weberian social science and, especially, the need to find a way out of the alleged impossibility to rationally justify value judgments. According to Duso, authors such as Voegelin, Strauss, and Arendt are of interest not because they try to propose new values or to revitalize old ones, but because they inaugurate “a new intellectual movement”²⁶ by which they question modern political science as a whole. The three philosophers thus transcend the very paradigm which speaks of values as distinct from facts. Far from being “foundationalists,” they recover the classical attitude by affirming the primacy of *theoria* as the practice of critical thought.

²⁴ Ibid., 90.

²⁵ Ibid., 124.

²⁶ Editor’s introduction to *Filosofia politica e pratica del pensiero: Strauss, Voegelin, Arendt*, ed. Giuseppe Duso (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1988), 9.

The first of the two chapters on Strauss is Carlo Galli's "Strauss, Voegelin, Arendt lettori di Thomas Hobbes: Tre paradigmi interpretativi della forma politica nella modernità" (Strauss, Voegelin, Arendt, readers of Thomas Hobbes: Three interpretive paradigms of the modern political form).²⁷ According to Galli, a renowned Schmitt scholar, Strauss's radical critique of modern irrationalism can show, by way of contrast, what Strauss sees as the authentic form of rationalism. In Hobbes's thought, immanence takes the place of transcendence, and by doing so it loses every reference to the Platonic idea. As Galli writes, it seems that Strauss considers reasonable only an "imitative" relationship with such a Platonic idea; moreover, what is necessary is not just the "imitation," but "the transcendence of the ideal model on which the imitation must be based."²⁸ And since modernity, in Hobbes, denies any relation with transcendence, it cannot but create order out of chaos, proving to be a form of sheer decisionism that reverses the relationship between good and evil. The problematic aspect of this "catastrophic" interpretation of modernity is, according to Galli, the dependence of Strauss's radicalism on the object of his polemical invective. In this sense, Strauss's return is at risk of being a mere mirror image of modernity itself. The second essay on Strauss is Mario Piccinini's "Leo Strauss e il problema teologico-politico alle soglie degli anni trenta" (Leo Strauss and the theologico-political problem at the threshold of the 1930s),²⁹ which focuses mainly on Strauss's interpretation of Hobbes in *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*³⁰ and his review of Carl Schmitt's *Der Begriff des Politischen*.³¹ The intention of this essay is to uncover the philosophical meaning of the two irreducible facts, politics and religion, which constitute a polarity essential to human nature, and which cannot be sublimated by culture nor obfuscated by modern political science. Therefore, Strauss's radical critique of modernity, by restating the primacy of religion and politics, helps shed light on the "transcendence" (*ulteriorità*) to which they refer, and that concerns man as man. According to Piccinini, the fact of religion refers back to, or discloses, the transcendence of law, which in turn refers back to a hidden God which human reason cannot comprehend. The fact of politics, in turn, poses to man as man the question of justice, a question that transcends the fact-value distinction. This Platonic-Socratic

²⁷ In Duso, *Filosofia politica e pratica del pensiero*, 25–57.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 33.

²⁹ In Duso, *Filosofia politica e pratica del pensiero*, 193–233.

³⁰ Leo Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (New York: Schocken Books, 1965).

³¹ Leo Strauss, "Comments on *Der Begriff des Politischen* by Carl Schmitt," in *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 329–51.

questioning of the claims of justice discloses the peculiar dimension of the philosophical inquiry because it refers back not to values but to “idealities.” An ideality is precisely the object of philosophy; therefore—and this step in Piccinini’s view is crucial—the transcendence disclosed by the question of justice discloses not a metaphysical dualism but an ontological opening. To use Piccinini’s words, “the question of what is right does not ‘establish’ the political, but grasps its opening on the reality of Being; *the specific element of philosophy emerges from the core of the political*.”³² It is this opening that, according to Piccinini, provides a way to transcend modernity.

C. GERMANA PARABOSCHI ON AMERICAN CONSERVATISM AND THE STRAUSSIAN SCHOOL

In 1990, the first Italian contribution on a political aspect of Strauss’s thought appeared. Germana Paraboschi’s *Leo Strauss e la destra americana* (Leo Strauss and the American Right) is a detailed account of the then most recent developments of the American Right and especially of Strauss’s relationship to the conservative movement. It concentrates particularly on the role “history” and “historicism” played in the intellectual or ideological debate between the 1950s and the 1980s (prominent figures in this debate are Russell Kirk, Paul Gottfried, and Claes G. Ryn). According to Paraboschi, in this “historicist” or “traditionalist” climate Strauss distinguishes himself on one hand by his critical stance toward the identification of good and ancestral and, on the other hand, by his critique of historicism. Paraboschi offers a concise but instructive interpretation of *Natural Right and History*, showing that Strauss’s investigation cannot be reduced to a purely historical account of modernity and the genesis of historicism, since its aim is the recovery of a classical form of rationalism. Paraboschi maintains that Strauss cannot possibly be understood as a historian of philosophy.³³ Paraboschi’s reconstruction shows that Strauss’s alleged political conservatism cannot be understood as a genuine form of traditionalism, but that it should be seen as a prudential attitude towards political change, revolution, and progress. A large part of the book deals with the so-called Straussians (e.g., Harry V. Jaffa, Waltern Berns, Thomas L. Pangle, Allan Bloom, and Francis Fukuyama). Paraboschi provides a detailed account of the different schools of thought, distinguishing between “West Coast” and “East Coast” Straussians, and describes the main reasons for the split as follows: “The separation originates from the different

³² *Filosofia politica e pratica del pensiero*, 230.

³³ Cf. Germana Paraboschi, *Leo Strauss e la destra americana* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1990), 74.

comprehension of the principles of the Declaration of Independence, but also from the interpretations of Lincoln's role in American history and political thought; lastly, it originates from the different meaning attributed to Strauss's teaching and to the role of political philosophy."³⁴ Paraboschi's account makes very clear that the main tenets of the Straussian schools can only partially be traced back to Strauss himself.

D. ROBERTO ESPOSITO ON STRAUSS'S DEBT TO MODERN PHILOSOPHY

In 1998, the academic mainstream finally appeared to unequivocally acknowledge Strauss's importance as a political philosopher. The prestigious publisher Einaudi (Turin) collected a volume of seventeen essays by Strauss (partly taken from *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*,³⁵ and partly from Thomas L. Pangle's collection *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*³⁶) and gave it the title *Gerusalemme e Atene: Studi sul pensiero politico dell'Occidente* (Jerusalem and Athens: Studies in Western political thought). The philosopher Roberto Esposito, famous for his works on biopolitics and the unpolitical, contributed a nearly forty-page introduction³⁷ which offers a very sympathetic view of Strauss's thought and questions the most ingrained interpretations of the secondary literature. In contrast to the opinion shared by opponents and apologists alike, Strauss is, according to Esposito, not an antimodern or reactionary thinker; rather, as the essays on Nietzsche, Schmitt, and Heidegger show, his thought is deeply rooted in twentieth-century philosophy. In particular, Strauss's movement of return has no conservative connotation, but tries to recover unexpressed potentials in the books of the past in order to break up the "sick continuity of the current historical process."³⁸ The model of Strauss's thought, according to Esposito, is Maimonides's messianism, a utopian vision that looks to "the past of the origin,"³⁹ an immemorial condition of fullness. Esposito identifies this "inverted" utopianism as the metaphysical background of Strauss's philosophical project, which must be interpreted as the secularization of Maimonidean messianic categories. Likewise, Strauss's art of reading has a

³⁴ Ibid., 81.

³⁵ Leo Strauss, *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

³⁶ Leo Strauss, *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism: An Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss*, ed. Thomas L. Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

³⁷ Roberto Esposito, introduction to *Gerusalemme e Atene: Studi sul pensiero politico dell'Occidente*, by Leo Strauss (Turin: Einaudi, 1998), vii–xliv.

³⁸ Ibid., x.

³⁹ Ibid.

cabalistic background insofar as it depends on the idea that “the truth of the Torah is constituted precisely by its concealment.”⁴⁰ Consequently, the alternative between Jerusalem and Athens assumes a crucial role. Esposito puts at the center of his account the irreconcilability of this original conflict, but in his reading of Strauss he does not assume a position in favor of one or the other: “Each is absolutely justified in its own ambit.”⁴¹ By analyzing the theme of law common to both Jerusalem and Athens, Esposito explores the discontinuity between the quest for truth and the city. In Esposito’s account, the philosophical truth maintains that “the happy life, from a natural point of view, does not coincide with the just life,” and that “man is not naturally a political animal, but only artificially so.”⁴² By discovering these facts, philosophy represents a mortal danger to the city. Esposito then identifies the theoretical presuppositions underlying Strauss’s vision of the conflict between philosophy and politics: “the philosophical truth, as such, cannot be realized in politics, because man is by nature a contradictory animal” and “even if it were possible to reach this truth, its result would be destructive since the natural good for the individual does not coincide with the common good.”⁴³ For Esposito, Strauss’s philosophy is a radically unpolitical activity, which is, nonetheless, responsible for the health of the political community. Esposito’s conclusion is that modernity fails insofar as it does not acknowledge the unbridgeable gap between *praxis* and *theoria*. But Strauss seems to admit the truth conveyed by modern nihilism—namely, that “values cannot be justified”⁴⁴—and to share with the moderns a nonteleological conception of nature; truths already known to the classics, but which had been kept hidden for prudential reasons.

E. GIOVANNI GIORGINI ON STRAUSS’S ARISTOCRATIC VIEW OF LIBERALISM

In 1999, Giovanni Giorgini published *Liberalismi eretici* (Heretical liberalisms), a collection of essays on a group of thinkers, each of whom he considers to be a liberal sui generis. Leo Strauss, Michael Oakeshott, Alasdair MacIntyre, Bernard Crick, Martha Nussbaum, and Stuart Hampshire are, as the title implies, the “heretics” of the liberal tradition, to whom Giorgini

⁴⁰ Ibid., xiv–xv.

⁴¹ Ibid., xvii.

⁴² Ibid., xxviii–xxix.

⁴³ Ibid., xxxii–xxxiii.

⁴⁴ Ibid., xxxviii.

appeals in an attempt to overcome the difficulties generated by a purely formal or relativistic conception of liberalism. Giorgini's overall thesis is that liberalism cannot be thought of as a value-free political doctrine. In other words, a free society cannot stand without embracing a certain educational model: "Liberalism is the offspring of education; nobody is born liberal; one becomes liberal."⁴⁵ The aim of his essay is, therefore, to explore different interpretations of what genuine liberal education is and to outline what he calls "humanistic liberalism."⁴⁶ In Giorgini's account, Strauss's thought can offer a significant contribution to this project. The main points of his teaching are the recovery of the classical doctrine of natural right and the rediscovery of the art of reading. Classical natural right appears to be "the application of philosophy to politics."⁴⁷ This doctrine is essentially connected to a teleological notion of the whole, in which man has a natural end that can be discovered by reason alone; "this end is virtue, that is, the perfect moral order."⁴⁸ In this connection, Giorgini presents Strauss's idea of liberal education as "the realistic answer...to the problem of the best form of government."⁴⁹ This idea is of particular importance for Giorgini because it raises the question concerning the good of the many and the good of the philosophers. For "only a good regime allows the philosopher to dedicate himself to contemplation and allows other human beings to live a good life."⁵⁰ The philosopher, aware of the danger of persecution by those who cannot be educated, must try to educate an elite of good rulers. In Giorgini's account, this political and educational task was also inspired by a kind of "Socratic piety," namely, Strauss's "awareness of his own duty in the face of the crisis of his time," to search for "the just society."⁵¹ Strauss's appeal to liberal education is, essentially, an appeal to a politics of virtue, and not to a specific doctrine of a single author. It can be better described as the return to the ancient educational model, for which Strauss introduces terms such as "Great Tradition" or "classical political thought." It is important to note that, in Giorgini's view, Strauss's return to the ancients amounts to a peculiar transformation of Nietzsche's notion of aristocracy: "Strauss gives a new content to the Nietzschean concept of

⁴⁵ Giovanni Giorgini, *Liberalismi eretici* (Trieste: Edizioni Goliardiche, 1999), 3.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 42.

‘aristocracy.’ The ‘aristocrat’ is the philosopher, who opted for ‘the examined life,’ a life of reflection and examination that permits him to ‘become similar to god.’”⁵² In conclusion, Giorgini maintains that Strauss’s most effective suggestion for liberalism’s present crisis is his “emphasis on the importance of liberal education,” which “by creating virtuous citizens, gives us the hope of creating an intellectual aristocracy in the midst of contemporary democratic society.”⁵³

F. PIER FRANCO TABONI ON THE CHALLENGE OF DESPOTISM AS A FORM OF EDUCATION

In 1998 and 2005, the first two parts of Pier Franco Taboni’s still unfinished trilogy on Leo Strauss appeared, in reverse order: *La città tirannica: La prima educazione di Leo Strauss* (The tyrannic city: Leo Strauss’s first education) (2005) and *La città di Caino e la città di Prometeo: Una lettura con Leo Strauss* (The city of Cain and the city of Prometheus: A reading with Leo Strauss) (1998). (The title of the third part will be *La città virtuosa* [The virtuous city].) Taboni, who in 1977 had edited and translated a volume containing essays from *What Is Political Philosophy?*⁵⁴ and the whole of *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*,⁵⁵ attempts a thorough reconstruction of Strauss’s political and philosophical insights. In the first volume, *La città tirannica*, Taboni intends to disprove the view that Strauss is a Nietzschean-Heideggerian philosopher. According to Taboni, Strauss opposes both thinkers as antiphilosophers who are to be held responsible for Germany’s final *reductio ad Hitlerum* (a formula, borrowed from Strauss, that Taboni uses to express the practically inevitable transformation of modernity into Hitlerism).⁵⁶ In this context, modernity is seen as an error emanating from Machiavelli’s and Hobbes’s “metaphysical counterrevolution.”⁵⁷ Since Hitlerism is the necessary outcome of the modern project, modernity must be rejected root and branch. The bulk of *La città tirannica* is dedicated to an examination of Strauss’s so-called first education, including his methodological training in the Heideggerian method of “Destruktion.” According to Taboni, it is only the “important event of

⁵² Ibid., 62–63.

⁵³ Ibid., 80.

⁵⁴ Leo Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1959).

⁵⁵ Leo Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: Its Basis and Its Genesis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952).

⁵⁶ Cf. Pier Franco Taboni, *La città tirannica: La prima educazione di Leo Strauss* (Urbino: Quattroventi, 2005), 11, 62, 83.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 43.

1933”⁵⁸ which triggered Strauss’s transformation from erudite scholar into political philosopher. For Taboni, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*⁵⁹ is, as it were, Strauss’s *Discourse on the Method*.⁶⁰ In Taboni’s account, Strauss did not conceive the philosophic life as an unpolitical and solitary way of life; it is only the despotic city that forces the philosopher to renounce to the public stage. When persecution sets in, philosophers have three choices: they can advise the tyrant (Simonides); they can choose the path that leads to self-sacrifice (Socrates); or they can choose a private life and a different communicative strategy (Farabi and Maimonides). In Taboni’s reconstruction, “the solitary life is not a genuine choice, but the result of conditions unfavorable to the wise man’s public vocation.”⁶¹ According to Taboni, the main thesis of *Persecution and the Art of Writing* is misled by a singular, but crucial, source. Strauss understood modern totalitarianism in light of Fustel de Coulange’s description of the “totalitarian” ancient *polis*; but the element missing from this picture is the peculiarly violent and systematic persecution that characterizes modern totalitarianism and distinguishes it from any ancient political community. In “totalitarian” Athens, Socrates could count on trustworthy friends and almost freely converse with them. This would not be the case for an intellectual living in Nazi Germany. By juxtaposing the totalitarianism of the *polis* with the totalitarianism of the modern state, Strauss obtained a false image of the intellectual’s situation in a totalitarian country and for this reason allowed himself an almost complacent assessment of persecution as a means of self-examination.

La città di Caino e la città di Prometeo, the shorter second part of the trilogy, deals with the theologico-political problem. In Taboni’s view, Strauss as a modern Jew found himself in a “spiritual hell.” Placed between the hammer of reason and the anvil of faith, Strauss’s spiritual torment should be compared to the “cosmic laceration” of Adam’s mind.⁶² The duality of “Jerusalem” and “Athens” must be understood, according to Taboni, as a conflict, a competition, an “agon”; not as a mutually exclusive alternative. When Strauss talks of himself as a “non-orthodox Jew,” he means a “Jewish philosopher, a Jew open to the logic of reason,” a philosophizing Jew “who does not renounce his

⁵⁸ Ibid., 72, 247.

⁵⁹ Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1952).

⁶⁰ Taboni, *La città tirannica*, 249.

⁶¹ Ibid., 297.

⁶² Pier Franco Taboni, *La città di Caino e la città di Prometeo: Una lettura con Leo Strauss* (Urbino: Quattro venti, 1998), 27.

Jewish identity, because this is recognized as compatible with his philosophical vocation.⁶³ Taboni translates the theologico-political problem in Kantian terms as “the problem of the a priori foundation of politics, a foundation that is universal and universalizing.”⁶⁴ The answer offered by classical political philosophy to this foundational problem is natural right. Classical natural right takes the place of divine revelation in its capacity as “*theologicum* which founds the *politicum*,” or, alternatively, as “revelation of the *politicum* grasped by reason.”⁶⁵ But this Socratic solution of the theologico-political problem is merely a *philosophical* solution, not its solution *tout court*. Another major point analyzed by Taboni is a view shared by reason and revelation, namely, the artificiality of man’s political character. By confronting biblical tales and Greek myths on the origin of civilization, Taboni concludes that “the city is not a spontaneous offspring of human nature.” To use his words, “Prometheus’s city is a milder version of Cain’s; both are the offspring of transgression and a place of expiation.”⁶⁶ He observes, then, that while Strauss does not accept the conventionalist thesis, he never openly answers the question whether the city is by nature or not. In conclusion, Taboni appears to be puzzled by the fact that, even though he advocates the classical doctrine of natural right, Strauss rejects from the outset the notion of *politicum naturale*, as well as that of *hostis naturalis*.

G. CARLO ALTINI ON PHILOSOPHICAL RADICALISM AND PRUDENTIAL CONSERVATISM

In 2000, a landmark contribution to Italian scholarship on Strauss’s thought appeared: Carlo Altini’s *Leo Strauss: Linguaggio del potere e linguaggio della filosofia* (Leo Strauss: The language of power and the language of philosophy). Altini is, to my knowledge, the most prolific Strauss scholar worldwide (he has more than thirty Strauss-related publications to date) and has contributed significantly to the diffusion of Strauss’s work in Italy since the early 2000s, establishing himself as the leading Strauss scholar in Italy. His first monograph aims at a balanced representation of the kind of thinker Leo Strauss was, and opposes any attempt at an ideological appropriation. Altini offers a rich and detailed contextualization of Strauss’s work in the intellectual world of the Weimar Republic. In the first place, Altini’s Strauss is a philosopher

⁶³ Ibid., 30.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 37.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 46.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 211–12.

who directly experienced the crisis of modernity, seen through the lens of the Jewish question. But his antimodernism had no religious connotations. As it appears from Strauss's interpretation of Hobbes, a crucial book in Altini's reconstruction, it is the Hobbesian "paradigm that understands the political order as based on *passions*"⁶⁷ which eventually failed to guarantee the good order of political life. Altini clarifies also that Strauss's view of esotericism "has nothing to do with any mystical or hermetic tradition."⁶⁸ On the contrary, esotericism is a prudential device, made necessary by the irreducible conflict between philosophy and politics. Indeed, Altini stresses with particular emphasis the unbelieving character of Strauss's thought. He denies forcefully the notion that Strauss was a "Jewish philosopher" and suggests instead, with Momigliano, that he was a "philosopher within Judaism." In order to explain the incompatibility of philosophical skepticism and religious faith, Altini explores in detail the theologico-political problem. In his reconstruction, the need for justification is the main problem every kind of political power must deal with. "Every authority, in order to be steady and lasting, cannot be founded on coercion or force alone";⁶⁹ it must be sustained by arbitrary but largely accepted opinions. These opinions present themselves as public truths, as political authorities. The theologico-political problem, in Altini's view, consists therefore in "the conflict between the different political authorities," "between different 'divine' authorities, that is, between different myths." These conflicts are not just "theological" controversies; they are, above all, "conflicts between ethical and political systems, which are in competition, and which imply different conceptions of justice."⁷⁰ Philosophy, in its attempt to transcend opinion, questions the very foundations of the political community and, therefore, appears to be a kind of impiety; but given that these foundations are also the foundation of the political and legal order, "impiety in the theologico-political sense is tantamount to anarchy."⁷¹ It is this subversive potential of philosophy which renders necessary the ruse of esoteric writing. Altini also underscores the dual character of Strauss's political philosophy, which combines theoretical radicalism and political conservatism. On this basis it seems evident that Strauss cannot be a sincere conservative. By its very nature, philosophy is limited to a critical

⁶⁷ Carlo Altini, *Leo Strauss: Linguaggio del potere e linguaggio della filosofia* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2000), 83.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 174.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 182.

function; “politics is not the dimension in which one can accomplish the truth of philosophy.”⁷² Altini suggests that Strauss is “perfectly aware that a direct and immediate recovery...of classical political philosophy is impossible.” Since the political solutions of the classics cannot be applied to modern societies, it is evident that what must be recovered are “the *frameworks* of classical political-philosophical thinking.” In this sense, maintains Altini, Strauss’s return must be seen as “experimental” or “ultramodern.”⁷³

Altini’s second monograph, *La storia della filosofia come filosofia politica: Carl Schmitt e Leo Strauss lettori di Thomas Hobbes* (History of philosophy as political philosophy: Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss, readers of Thomas Hobbes) (2004), reconstructs in detail the way in which Schmitt and Strauss, respectively, tried to understand the crisis of modernity by going back to its origin, namely, to the work of Thomas Hobbes. Such an investigation would eventually question the foundational categories of modern politics and modern science, and would thereby prove their unscientific character. In fact, Strauss identified the relationship between natural science and the modern ideal of civilization as the focal point of every analysis that intends to understand the cause of the contemporary crisis. The crisis is the necessary outcome of the blending of “philosophical skepticism and scientific dogmatism, which determines the ‘Promethean’ and, at the same time, nihilistic character of the whole modern enterprise launched by Hobbes.”⁷⁴ Notwithstanding the common perception of modernity as a problem, Schmitt and Strauss adopted two very different interpretive paradigms which, in turn, refer back to two very different theoretical perspectives. In Altini’s account, the confrontation between Schmitt and Strauss amounts to a confrontation between political theology and the theologico-political problem. Political theology must be understood as a “theoretical paradigm according to which the justification of political power occurs on a *revealed* theological basis, which is the foundation of the supreme sovereign authority, and which expresses a substantial religious and cultural *identity* of the body politics.” The theologico-political problem is, on the contrary, “a theoretical paradigm according to which the justification of political power...occurs on a *wordly* basis, and which underscores...the role played by the *theologico-political conflict*.” For Altini, Strauss’s theologico-political problem refers back to the conflict, which is

⁷² Ibid., 74.

⁷³ Ibid., 108.

⁷⁴ Carlo Altini, *La storia della filosofia come filosofia politica: Carl Schmitt e Leo Strauss lettori di Thomas Hobbes* (Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2004), 16.

“eminently political, and only secondarily theological,” between different ethical and political systems, that is, different comprehensive conceptions of justice and political order.⁷⁵ In this connection, Altini reveals the fundamental difference between political theology and political philosophy: “political theology represents the crisis of rationalism; it represents also the moment in which philosophy ceases to raise *critically* the problem of the theologico-political *belonging*.”⁷⁶

H. MAURO FARNESI CAMELLONE’S SPECULATIVE RETURN TO PLATO

In 2007, Mauro Farnesi Camellone, a member of Giuseppe Duso’s research group on conceptual history at the University of Padua, published *Giustizia e storia: Saggio su Leo Strauss* (Justice and history: An essay on Leo Strauss), which builds, in an original way, on some of Duso’s and Piccinini’s fundamental insights. Farnesi Camellone’s book offers a general interpretation of Strauss’s thought, drawing on Strauss’s German writings and, above all, on a speculative reading of Strauss’s late interpretation of Plato and the problem of classical natural right. The author sees Strauss as “a philosopher of the *crisis*”⁷⁷ and attempts to verify whether he was truly able to break the spell of modern rationalism which has made impossible the philosophical interrogation of what is right or just. Strauss’s enterprise is to “be considered mainly as the attempt to determine the condition of possibility of political science.”⁷⁸ According to Farnesi Camellone, modernity tried to neutralize the theologico-political problem, that is, “the conflict of the different...foundational myths and values of society,”⁷⁹ by means of tolerance and assimilation. This attempt failed because political communities always tend to transform a particular opinion or belief into an absolute truth. Socratic philosophy, by contrast, opens a space where it is possible to raise the question of the good order of human life without neutralizing the tension between reason, revelation, and politics. The opening of this space requires, in turn, a return from modernity to antiquity. The possibility of a return to the classical form of rationalism is tantamount to “the possibility of reason itself.”⁸⁰ Such a

⁷⁵ Ibid., 27.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 65.

⁷⁷ Mauro Farnesi Camellone, *Giustizia e storia: Saggio su Leo Strauss* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2007), 11.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 24.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 30.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 94.

movement begins with the radical questioning of the historicist prejudice and proceeds “with the recovery of the philosophical space beyond modern reason, a space that coincides precisely with the possibility of raising again a radical question concerning the political; that is, the question of the right way of life.”⁸¹ The return reconstructed by Farnesi Camellone consists in Strauss’s movement from Hobbes to Plato; by recovering the Socratic-Platonic interrogation of justice, Strauss performs a speculative operation which, against the relativistic tendency of historicism, “makes intelligible again the condition of the possibility of political philosophy,” namely, “an unhistorical time” and an “anomic space.”⁸² In other words, Strauss discloses a philosophical eternal present⁸³ which corresponds to the fundamental problems coeval with man. Farnesi Camellone emphasizes the subversive character of philosophy understood as skepticism or *zetesis*; for “the figure of the philosopher appears as uncontrollable to every established political order.”⁸⁴ Philosophy proves the questionability of every political order; as practice of thought, “the radicalness of the philosophical question can *impose* itself before the claim of truth of the law.”⁸⁵ Farnesi Camellone also underscores the fact that philosophy originates from the political conflict inherent in human life as such. For the conflict of different fundamental opinions on what the right way of life is demands a solution; the search for this solution leads, in turn, to the philosophical life of unending questioning.

3. FURTHER DEVELOPMENT OF STRAUSSIAN SCHOLARSHIP IN ITALY

In contrast to the second wave of Italian scholarship on Strauss, the third wave, which began in the mid-2000s, was characterized by a slightly different approach. Earlier generations of Italian scholars established Strauss as one of the major political philosophers of the twentieth century, so that a new generation could build on the pioneering achievements of their predecessors. In this sense, one could speak of true progress in the research. Many of the books published in this second phase grew out of doctoral dissertations; that is, many scholars belonging to the new generation came up studying Strauss himself and therefore tended to raise questions that arose

⁸¹ Ibid., 108.

⁸² Ibid., 145.

⁸³ Cf. *ibid.*, 153.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 235.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 242–43.

from within Strauss's work or were more strictly related to a single book or a single theme. It is worth noting that, starting in the early 2000s, Strauss's work also experienced a large diffusion owing to the Italian editions of many important books which hitherto were accessible only in the original languages and were also relatively difficult to purchase. Thanks mainly to the efforts of Carlo Altini, but also to those of Gian Franco Frigo, Riccardo Caporali, and others, practically all of Strauss's books are now available in Italian translations and have become, in a sense, part of Italy's philosophical landscape. Altini also contributed to what could be seen as the definitive acknowledgment of Strauss's stature as a philosopher: in 2009 the renowned publishing house Laterza published Altini's *Introduzione a Leo Strauss*. The volume appeared in the context of the series *I filosofi* (The philosophers); the series (which could be compared to the Very Short Introductions published by Oxford University Press) collects handy volumes that present intellectual biographies of the great thinkers in Western culture. Eventually, in 2018, in the wake of the first national meeting of Italian Straussians held in Modena, a series was born: *Straussiana* (edited by Carlo Altini, Raimondo Cubeddu, and Giovanni Giorgini, and published by Edizioni ETS, Pisa), specifically dedicated to the publication of books by and about Leo Strauss.

In this new phase, the problem of the crisis of modernity, even though still a major theme, slightly receded into the background. The research focused more on other problems which were less related to Italy's ideological situation and more closely related to the intrinsic nature of philosophy in its original meaning as understood by Strauss. For example, great attention was dedicated to Strauss's philosophical relationship or dialogue with his contemporaries; in other cases, Strauss was studied as an interpreter of canonized authors such as Plato or Maimonides. In both circumstances, the guiding intention was to pinpoint Strauss's original philosophical character by way of close comparison with other thinkers. Strauss was progressively perceived more as a philosopher than as a political thinker. In this respect, a growing number of present-day Italian scholars considered Strauss's recovery of Platonic political philosophy in the light of its self-reflexive dimension, rather than as an attempt merely to recover premodern political science.

A. CHIARA ADORISIO ON COHEN'S LEGACY IN THE WORK OF STRAUSS

Chiara Adorisio's *Leo Strauss lettore di Hermann Cohen: Dalla filosofia moderna al ritorno agli antichi* (Leo Strauss, reader of Hermann Cohen: From modern philosophy to the return to the ancients) (2007) offers an in-depth

exploration of the relation of Strauss's thought to Hermann Cohen's. Although Strauss seems never to have met Cohen, in Adorasio's account he was deeply affected by the founder of the Neo-Kantian School. Accordingly, Cohen should be counted among the great contemporary thinkers who played a decisive role in the genesis of Strauss's thought. Adorasio intends to prove that Strauss developed in a very personal way "Cohen's philosophical project"⁸⁶ by identifying three central ideas, which represent Cohen's legacy as taken up and transformed by Strauss. The first two points concern the interpretations, respectively, of Spinoza and Maimonides. Adorasio shows that, in both cases, Strauss takes his bearings from Cohen's interpretations of the two philosophers but eventually overturns them. The third point discussed by Adorasio is theoretically more challenging and involves a specific understanding of Strauss's thought itself; it concerns the dualism of Jerusalem and Athens. Cohen explored this dualism mostly in *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*, where he confronted biblical religion and Greek science in order to show how these two "spiritual forces of humanity" were transformed into a higher synthesis, namely, modern civilization. Each component has its own limits and needs to be completed by the other. Adorasio assumes that Strauss learned from Cohen how to consider "Jerusalem" and "Athens" not just as two codes, or two abstract notions, but as "two forces of the human soul."⁸⁷ "Jerusalem" and "Athens" are, in Adorasio's reconstruction of Strauss's position, two different ways of life or fundamental attitudes, which are coeval with man. Strauss seems to deny firmly the possibility of a synthesis between the two. In fact, in his principal works, Strauss appears to radicalize the opposition between "Athens" and "Jerusalem," and to affirm their irreducible conflict. But, according to Adorasio, in his late introduction to an English translation of Cohen's *Religion of Reason*,⁸⁸ Strauss appears to question his own view. Here Strauss "seems to take up Cohen's project in order to elaborate a new way to raise the issue that underlies it. Starting from the intrinsic rationality of the texts of the Jewish tradition, a confrontation between philosophy and Judaism becomes possible; this confrontation cannot be reduced to a conflict, and thus cannot be reduced to the mutual

⁸⁶ Chiara Adorasio, *Leo Strauss lettore di Hermann Cohen: Dalla filosofia moderna al ritorno agli antichi* (Florence: Giuntina, 2007), 11.

⁸⁷ Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1972), 158.

⁸⁸ Leo Strauss, "Introductory Essay for Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*," in *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, 233–47.

rejection of philosophy and theology.”⁸⁹ This dilemma is the fundamental problem experienced by the “modern Jewish philosopher,” and by the “medieval Jewish philosopher” as well, who tries to “reconcile in a vital and fruitful relation”⁹⁰ the spirit of science or philosophy and the spirit of the Bible. It remains unclear if Strauss’s attempt can be considered successful, for, as Adorasio concludes, with his return to Maimonides Strauss “has only indicated the extreme difficulty and, at the same time, the necessity to restate in a new way the problem of the relationship between Athens and Jerusalem.”⁹¹

B. IRENE ABIGAIL PICCININI ON COHEN’S EARLY CHALLENGE TO STRAUSS

In the very same year as Adorasio’s study, a second book on Cohen’s influence on Strauss’s thought appeared. Irene Abigail Piccinini’s *Una guida fedele: L’influenza di Hermann Cohen sul pensiero di Leo Strauss* (A faithful guide: Hermann Cohen’s influence on Leo Strauss’s thought), in contradistinction to Adorasio’s work, is not a treatment of Strauss’s entire intellectual biography; rather, it focuses on the 1920s and 1930s. Piccinini maintains that Cohen, especially in the first phase of Strauss’s career, acted as a “faithful guide” whose legacy had been taken up by the young Strauss in a creative way. The virtue of faithfulness (Jerusalem’s virtue), as opposed to the virtue of truthfulness (Athens’s virtue), is presented as the very keystone of the whole interpretation. It is, in the first place, Cohen’s faithfulness to Jerusalem, despite his being a philosopher, which inspired Strauss’s philosophical project. Piccinini breaks down the question of Jewish identity, which is the central issue of her book, into three different aspects. The first regards the problem of Judaism in modern times. In Cohen’s view, “Judaism and Germanism have in common the idea of humanity as a unity and the idea of ethical socialism”;⁹² these two notions, originally a discovery of Jewish prophecy, have been rediscovered by German thought. Cohen, therefore, was able to find a deep harmony between the Jewish way of life and the Western way of life; he himself represented, in the eyes of many young German Jews, the most successful synthesis of two identities only superficially in conflict with one another. Strauss, notwithstanding his high admiration for Cohen,

⁸⁹ Adorasio, *Leo Strauss lettore di Hermann Cohen*, 207.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 208.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 238.

⁹² Irene Abigail Piccinini, *Una guida fedele: L’influenza di Hermann Cohen sul pensiero di Leo Strauss* (Turin: Trauben, 2007), 43.

recognized the essential limitations of every assimilation. From a political perspective, the de facto condition of the German Jews was far from a harmony; from a religious perspective, Strauss's critique concerned the attempt to substitute a vague mystical attitude for the orthodox faith in the living God. Cohen's synthesis was, for him, an almost unrepeatable *unicum*. The second and third aspects considered by Piccinini are Cohen's interpretation of Spinoza and Maimonides. On this point, Piccinini's reconstruction is quite close to the one presented by Adorasio. The main difference consists in the fact that Piccinini concentrates more on Strauss's Maimonides as offering a way out of modernity's irreducible contrast of Enlightenment and orthodoxy. According to Piccinini, Maimonides's thought opens the possibility of a return to a common ground where "reason and revelation do not conflict and do not exclude each other."⁹³ In this context, Piccinini presents the *teshuvà* as a possible solution of the modern Jew's predicament. The return to Maimonides would imply a return to an "authentic Jewish rationality, an integral Jewish identity" which is not "split by the dilemma between orthodoxy and Enlightenment, between conservatism and modernity."⁹⁴ Piccinini eventually refrains from unconditionally attributing this position to Strauss himself. Although it seems "possible to remain a Jew without sacrificing reason on the altar of identity,"⁹⁵ it is still not clear whether Strauss, according to Piccinini, fully accomplished his own *teshuvà*.

C. RAIMONDO CUBEDDU ON STRAUSS, CHRISTIANITY, AND THE ORIGINS OF MODERNITY

In *Tra le righe: Leo Strauss su Cristianesimo e Liberalismo* (Between the lines: Leo Strauss on Christianity and liberalism) (2010), Raimondo Cubeddu focuses on what he views as one of the most intriguing aspects of Strauss's account of modernity, namely, the modern critique of religion as the origin of liberalism. Cubeddu's study concentrates on Strauss's interpretation of Christianity and Christian political thought. In Cubeddu's view, "Christianity cannot be considered as extraneous to the pitiful decay of political philosophy"⁹⁶ in late antiquity. By carefully reconstructing and putting together Strauss's hints and scanty remarks on this subject, Cubeddu

⁹³ Ibid., 152.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 228.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 230.

⁹⁶ Raimondo Cubeddu, *Tra le righe: Leo Strauss su Cristianesimo e Liberalismo* (Lungro: Marco, 2010), 13.

maintains that modernity must be understood as a response to Christianity's failure to face the problem of political order. Cubeddu questions whether the Christian attempt to merge reason and revelation must be considered the main cause of that political failure and reflects on the possibility of a confrontation between Strauss and Catholic thinkers. According to Cubeddu, the great majority of Strauss's Catholic readers "do not accept the thesis... according to which one should not even attempt to synthesize Athens and Jerusalem."⁹⁷ Therefore, they are not able to engage in a sympathetic confrontation with him. A second controversial point is Strauss's understanding of the relationship between Christianity and Judaism. Cubeddu focuses on a minor, but puzzling, text, "Perspectives on the Good Society," in which Strauss gives an account of a symposium and makes it difficult for the reader to understand where and when he is expressing his own views. This presents a problem, since this text contains a most sweeping statement concerning the relationship between Christianity and Judaism, to the effect that "at least from Paul on, Christianity has never understood Judaism."⁹⁸ Cubeddu assumes that the reluctance of Strauss on this subject, and of many of his Catholic readers as well, might be justified by prudence, since the notion of a Judeo-Christian tradition appears to be "a noble lie that conceals very well centuries of misunderstandings."⁹⁹ Cubeddu also examines Strauss's thesis on the origin of liberalism as a radical break with the philosophical and biblical tradition. Cubeddu applauds Strauss's definition of liberalism as "the solution of the political problem by economic means." In Cubeddu's view, this solution foreshadows the "elimination of politics" or of the "realm of public decisions," but not the elimination of religion, which would remain in any case an individual choice. It cannot be seen as a secularization of Christian tenets of faith; since it is not secularized political theology, there is no need to "repent" or "return" anywhere.¹⁰⁰ According to Cubeddu, Strauss's account of modern political thought is flawed by the frequent blending of liberalism with democratic thought, a fact that leads him to blur the actual contours of the liberal tradition. But the greatest limit of his teaching seems to lie in his "nostalgia" for the classics and the interpretation of modernity as

⁹⁷ Ibid., 44.

⁹⁸ Leo Strauss, "Perspectives on the Good Society," in *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 267.

⁹⁹ Cubeddu, *Tra le righe*, 46.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 86.

a “big, terrible error,”¹⁰¹ an attitude that prevents him from offering effective political proposals.

D. ALESSANDRA FUSSI ON STRAUSS AS READER OF THE GREEK PHILOSOPHERS

Alessandra Fussi’s *La città nell’anima: Leo Strauss lettore di Platone e Senofonte* (The city within the soul: Leo Strauss, reader of Plato and Xenophon) (2011) presents Strauss as a reader of ancient Greek philosophers. Fussi, a student of Stanley Rosen, attempts to establish Strauss’s importance as an interpreter of Plato and Xenophon by replying to the most significant critiques of Strauss’s interpretations. Although she does not agree with every interpretive claim of Strauss’s, Fussi maintains the usefulness of his careful hermeneutical approach for understanding Xenophon’s Socratic writings and the Platonic dialogues; she says that “Strauss is one of the philosophers from whom one can learn the most about Plato.”¹⁰² Examining Plato’s *Republic* and Xenophon’s *Hiero*, Fussi comments in detail on Strauss’s recovery of classic political rationalism; in her account, ancient political philosophy is characterized by a political realism “which can be compared to Machiavelli’s”;¹⁰³ the pedagogical utopianism of the classics shows, in truth, their full awareness of the limits of political action and the dangers of abstracting from certain aspects of human nature for the sake of justice. But at the center of Fussi’s book stands a thorough analysis of the nature of philosophy as *skepsis* and an interpretation of the alternative between Jerusalem and Athens. Given Strauss’s “clear choice for Athens and against Jerusalem, one might assume that he did not think simply about a contrast between philosophy and revelation, but assumed a victory of the one over the other.”¹⁰⁴ In Fussi’s account, this is a plausible, but ultimately false, assumption, for it does not take into account the concept of philosophy defended by Strauss. For “philosophy is not able to refute revelation; it could succeed only if it would be able to give a full account of the whole.”¹⁰⁵ According to Fussi, the necessity of refuting revelation is assumed only by modern philosophy. It is not indispensable, for philosophy in the original sense, to refute revelation in order to be considered

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 150.

¹⁰² Alessandra Fussi, *La città nell’anima: Leo Strauss lettore di Platone e Senofonte* (Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2011), 12.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 227.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 170.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

as a rational pursuit. Therefore, it retains “the legitimacy of a way of life,” “a way of life that questions itself” and that is, for this reason, “necessarily open to the possibility that other ways of life might be supported.” This very fact prevents its “transformation into a discipline.”¹⁰⁶ In the same context, Fussi explores the difference between vulgar morality and genuine morality; the philosophical life represents the solution to the problem of combining happiness and justice. But in the case of the philosopher, morality is merely a means to an end, or a byproduct of his leading passion: the desire for knowledge. Strauss, following Plato, “identifies the philosophical activity as the only way of life worth living, as the only ‘cure’ for the illness of the soul; this way of life guarantees a just life, independent of revelation.”¹⁰⁷ But this view ultimately puzzles Fussi. A connection between this intellectual activity and moral character does not seem to be evident; she mentions the case of Heidegger and his highly questionable moral and political choices. Strauss’s philosopher appears therefore to be almost an idealization which takes the place of the ideas: “the philosopher becomes a paradigm for life, a model which is hard to match, an ideal figure devoid of any particular character.”¹⁰⁸

E. ALBERTO Ghibellini ON THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF DIVINE REVELATION ACCORDING TO STRAUSS

In *Al di là della politica: Filosofia e retorica in Leo Strauss* (Beyond politics: Philosophy and rhetoric in Leo Strauss) (2012), Alberto Ghibellini investigates the philosophical originality of Strauss by concentrating on what he sees as the central aspect of Strauss’s thought, namely, the theoretical basis of the distinction between esotericism and exotericism. This basis is represented by the fact that, ultimately, only a law revealed by God or the gods can justify morality as a categorical imperative. But since philosophy denies the cognitive value of divine revelation, it is necessary to hide the disruptive character of the philosophical enterprise in order to protect the moral foundations of the political community. Ghibellini is convinced that, in contrast to what many interpreters assume, and contrary to some of his explicit statements, Strauss developed a conclusive argument capable of refuting revealed religion. He identifies the crucial theological weakness with the experiential knowledge on which every alleged divine revelation must be based. In Ghibellini’s account, every claim about God must ultimately be based on

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 264.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 249.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 299.

some direct experience, on some empirical knowledge of facts. Indeed, “even a purely fideistic position...must be based on such a kind of *knowledge*, as distinguished from simple *belief*.” Ghibellini also suggests that “a strategy to refute even a radically fideistic position...could concentrate upon such ‘*experiential* knowledge,’ and reject its very condition of possibility.”¹⁰⁹ As Ghibellini acknowledges, Strauss did not explicitly develop this argument, but scattered some hints throughout his writings. By means of a painstaking examination of texts such as “The Law of Reason in the *Kuzari*” and “Reason and Revelation,”¹¹⁰ Ghibellini articulates what he sees as Strauss’s argumentative strategy. He establishes that the content of experiential knowledge must be some self-communication of God; this experiential knowledge “seems to represent...the true basis of faith in revelation”¹¹¹ even according to the most intransigent fideism. In Ghibellini’s view, what Strauss tries to suggest is that this minimal knowledge is in itself impossible. On one hand, man cannot know that what he experiences is the word of the living God or a mere hallucination; and “if man cannot know that,” the view that God revealed himself to man “is bound to remain an indemonstrable option.” Ghibellini shows then the “circularity of every attempt based on experience”¹¹² to affirm a faith which is not purely fideistic. For the believer cannot accept that belief is merely based on *belief*; in order to prevent the risk of radical irrationalism, “one has to *know* that such a ‘call’ comes from God.”¹¹³ But this knowledge is exactly what appears to be denied to man as man. On the other hand, Ghibellini suggests that, between the lines, Strauss hinted at the contradictory character of the very notion of the self-communication of God. The idea of revelation as literally “the word of God” appears (on grounds of natural theology) to be theologically impossible,¹¹⁴ for it would call into question the unity of a God who, in order to speak, would need a mouth and a tongue; while, on the contrary, as Maimonides teaches, God must be thought as strictly incorporeal. The logical impossibility of God’s self-communication

¹⁰⁹ Alberto Ghibellini, *Al di là della politica: Filosofia e retorica in Leo Strauss* (Genoa: De Ferrari-Genova University Press, 2012), 111.

¹¹⁰ Leo Strauss, “The Law of Reason in the *Kuzari*,” in *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 95–141; Leo Strauss, “Reason and Revelation,” in *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-political Problem*, by Heinrich Meier (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 141–80.

¹¹¹ Ghibellini, *Al di là della politica*, 150.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 158.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 159.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 178–79.

reveals the biblical religion as a form of “*heroic delusion*, or, in Platonic terms, a *gennaion pseudos*.”¹¹⁵

F. RAIMONDO CUBEDDU ON STRAUSS’S DIALOGUE WITH THE AUSTRIAN SCHOOL

In *L'ombra della tirannide: Il male endemico della politica in Hayek e Strauss* (The shadow of tyranny: Hayek, Strauss, and the endemic disease of politics) (2014), Raimondo Cubeddu brings together the major themes of his research and stages a dialogue between Strauss and Friedrich A. von Hayek. This confrontation is an attempt to answer Cubeddu’s most urgent questions: he asks whether “tyranny or totalitarianism is the congenital evil of political life, and not just the decay of a particular political regime,” and whether it is “possible to do without politics.”¹¹⁶ Cubeddu presents Strauss and Hayek as two very different thinkers who nonetheless share some common positions. Hayek and Strauss have, in the first place, common enemies: modern tyranny or totalitarianism, scientism, and historicism. Both recognize that politics has an essential tyrannical tendency, but they try to limit political power in different ways. Strauss insists on natural right as an objective standard of justice; Hayek believes that a combination of rule of law, free market, and common law can fend off tyranny. The main difference between these two thinkers consists in the fact that Strauss “did not believe in the liberal solution of the political problem by economic means.”¹¹⁷ In Cubeddu’s words, “for Strauss, the condition of the best regime is represented by the stability granted by the *oikonomia*; for Hayek, this condition is the mobility allowed by chrematistics.”¹¹⁸ Strauss, “like the classics, accepts coercion as a natural and therefore ineradicable element of the *politeia*,”¹¹⁹ while Hayek views economic liberty as the best way to acquire, produce, and share knowledge. Adopting the classical attitude of indifference regarding poverty and pauperism, Strauss saw chrematistics as a dangerous form of immoderation. Cubeddu therefore raises the question of why Strauss did not allow for the emancipation of economy and technology from moral and political control. Strauss does not seem to recognize the relative dignity of the liberal solution;

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 182.

¹¹⁶ Raimondo Cubeddu, *L'ombra della tirannide: Il male endemico della politica in Hayek e Strauss* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2014), 16.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 123.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 155.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 223.

for, even though it cannot grant the fulfillment of the highest longings of man, it reduces the scarcity of goods and knowledge; it offers a political solution to the theologico-political problem, transforming religion into a purely individual and private choice; it restrains the oppressive character of political power and vanquishes persecution. Cubeddu surmises that Strauss rejected liberalism as a failed attempt to overcome classical political philosophy and Christianity; its failure would be due to “the impossibility of doing without the Christian idea of providence,”¹²⁰ the remnants of which would still survive in secularized form in some crucial insights of political economy. In Cubeddu’s view, the economic solution “cannot solve the problem of human happiness, but it can make available to everybody more time to try to solve it; it gives to the philosopher the possibility to lead his philosophical life; and gives to the gentleman more time to look for that kind of knowledge necessary to rule well.”¹²¹ Conversely, Strauss’s antimodern and conservative political proposal, that is, the education of an elite of gentlemen, seems neither effective nor feasible, for it would imply an unbearable social immobility on one hand, and would forgo the undeniable material progress granted by a free market economy, on the other.

G. RAFFAELLA COLOMBO ON THE NIHILISTIC CONSEQUENCES OF REASON

Raffaella Colombo’s *Leo Strauss e la retorica del ritorno* (Leo Strauss and the rhetoric of return) (2014) offers a general interpretation of Strauss’s thought that insists particularly on the connection between rationalism and nihilism and the political necessity of religion. According to Colombo’s reconstruction, what most characterizes Strauss’s thought is a “pessimistic radicalism,” that is, “a paternalistic concern for the inability of the majority”¹²² to lead a rational life and to regulate their behavior accordingly. Strauss’s political philosophy, combining radical rationalism and prudential conservatism, criticizes the attempt of modern political philosophy to do without religion and to base a political order on human passions. Strauss does not “affirm the irrational nature of relativism; it is reason itself, by means of its critical and self-critical power, that cultivates the relativism of values, since it questions what we believe to be just or right.”¹²³ Since relativism—the necessary out-

¹²⁰ Ibid., 273.

¹²¹ Ibid., 287–88.

¹²² Raffaella Colombo, *Leo Strauss e la retorica del ritorno* (Milan: Mimesis, 2014), 30.

¹²³ Ibid., 42.

come of philosophical investigation—is politically disrupting, it is necessary to recover Plato’s “ironic utopianism and pious realism.”¹²⁴ But this insight seems to confirm Strauss’s deep connections with modern thought. Colombo maintains that, for Strauss, “man...is not a *zoon politikon*,”¹²⁵ and in this sense his anthropology is more indebted to modern thought than one would expect. Since human sociability is artificial, political life stands in need of a noble lie—that is, of revealed religion, which literally “saves” the political coexistence of the nonphilosophers. Colombo characterizes Strauss’s political orientation as “reactionary, but as malleable and dynamic as well, since the only thing stable is its aim, namely, social order.”¹²⁶ The specificity of a political system is, therefore, secondary; what matters to Strauss, according to Colombo, are the external conditions of the philosophic life. Colombo’s most challenging proposal is the confrontation between Strauss’s political philosophy and Spinoza’s, for, she maintains, Spinoza represents a radical alternative to Strauss’s pessimistic anthropology. Even for Spinoza it is true that only the wise man knows what the authentic good is, and can accordingly behave rationally without the need for laws and coercive institutions. But, in contrast to Strauss, Spinoza would add that the wise man “is, after all, a part of the very same fabric of reality” in which all individuals, driven by their *conatus*, “heighten their joy or weaken because of sadness.”¹²⁷ Since the happiness and freedom of the wise man are metaphysically entangled in the happiness and freedom of the multitude, it seems impossible to assume Strauss’s position of detachment from the many. In Colombo’s words, “there is no freedom of the philosopher without a corresponding increased level of self-awareness of all other individuals.”¹²⁸ Colombo concludes by observing that Strauss’s most problematic aspect is represented by his radical skepticism, which implies an ideological risk, namely, that such a skeptical and “empty” thought could be “penetrated” by politics, that is, by a “political doctrine...aiming at the control of the individuals, rather than at their full development.”¹²⁹

¹²⁴ Ibid., 45.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 94.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 106.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 72.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 144.

H. MARCO MENON ON THE GODS OF THE CITY
AND THE DIVINITY OF WISDOM

In *Saggezza politica e poesia: Leo Strauss lettore di Aristofane* (Political wisdom and poetry: Leo Strauss, reader of Aristophanes) (2016), I offer a reading of Strauss's *Socrates and Aristophanes*,¹³⁰ concentrating on what I take to be the book's main philosophical problems. In my reconstruction, Strauss first raises a fundamental question concerning the possibility and necessity of political philosophy, which he tries to articulate by means of a close reading of Aristophanes's comedies, above all the *Clouds*. In his interpretation of this comedy, Strauss concentrates on the way of life of the unpolitical and godless pre-Socratic Socrates and makes explicit the dangers caused by the absence of political prudence and self-knowledge. Above all, I highlight Strauss's concern for the issues implied by Socrates's disdain for the human roots of the belief in the gods. This does not mean that Socrates did not think about the gods, for, as I maintain, Socrates "does not recognize Zeus as a god, that is, as a model of bliss and perfection," and therefore must have had a notion of what is truly divine. It is the concern for learning that appears to be "the Socratic standard of divinity."¹³¹ I underscore the utmost importance of the confrontation between the poet and the philosopher for the problem of the gods and build my interpretation on the two sides of the issue: "on one hand, the problem of the gods is the theologico-political problem of the gods of the city; on the other, it is the problem of a divine life, which brings together perfection and bliss."¹³² To this effect, Strauss's Latin formula *deus est quem dei deum esse declarant* (a god is what the gods declare a god to be) plays a crucial role. This formula is not meant as an answer to the question *quid sit deus*, but it is its puzzling reformulation. In fact, I try to show that the gods must be recognized as gods on the basis of some criterion. As appears from Strauss's reading of the *Frogs*, a being such as Zeus "would be worshiped as a god because it is useful to the city, because it satisfies the requirements of the political community."¹³³ I articulate Strauss's understanding of what for Aristophanes must be the motives that bring the many to recognize a being as a god; this investigation leads ultimately to the understanding of the notion of piety, which is strictly connected to man's expectations, hopes, and

¹³⁰ Leo Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes* (New York: Basic Books, 1966).

¹³¹ Marco Menon, *Saggezza politica e poesia: Leo Strauss lettore di Aristofane* (Mantua: Universitas Studiorum, 2016), 38.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 55–56.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 103.

needs. Since men look up to the overcoming of the limits inherent to human nature and the control of chance, “the divinity of the gods can be understood as the hypostatization of the hope in the impossible, and of man’s triumph over unforeseeable chance.”¹³⁴ The gods allegedly “overcome the limits which *techne* and *nomos* cannot overcome....The belief in the gods amounts to the hope that the impossible becomes possible.”¹³⁵ However, as Strauss makes clear in his comment to the *Clouds*, a man such as Socrates “denies that Zeus is a god because of his childishness in relation to learning.”¹³⁶ This denial is based on the philosophical criterion of divinity, which opposes the criterion adopted by the nonphilosophers: “From Socrates’s point of view...the only gods are the wise men, even though they are not immortal.”¹³⁷ Moreover, it appears that philosophy, as exemplified by the Socratic way of life depicted in the *Clouds*, “by virtue of its transcending love and fear, can be understood as the complete overcoming of piety.”¹³⁸ In this connection, I draw heavily on Strauss’s lecture “On Plato’s *Euthyphron*,”¹³⁹ which seems to convey some of the central insights also presented in *Socrates and Aristophanes*.

I. PIERPAOLO CICCARELLI ON STRAUSS’S DEBT TO HUSSERL AND HIS CRITICISM OF HEIDEGGER

Pierpaolo Ciccarelli’s *Leo Strauss tra Husserl e Heidegger: Filosofia pratica e fenomenologia* (Leo Strauss between Husserl and Heidegger: Practical philosophy and phenomenology) (2018) is a painstaking interpretation of Strauss’s “Philosophy as Rigorous Science and Political Philosophy.”¹⁴⁰ The book aims to demonstrate that Strauss must be understood as “a phenomenological thinker,”¹⁴¹ whose decisive influence, in this respect, was Husserl (and not, as many interpreters believe, Heidegger). In Ciccarelli’s account, the most important lesson that Strauss learned from Husserl concerns the pre-scientific genesis of scientific concepts. Science takes its bearings from what Strauss refers to as the “natural comprehension” of the world. Philosophy

¹³⁴ Ibid., 173.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 174.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 98.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 103.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 174.

¹³⁹ Leo Strauss, “An Untitled Lecture on Plato’s *Euthyphron*,” *Interpretation* 24 (1996): 5–23.

¹⁴⁰ Leo Strauss, “Philosophy as Rigorous Science and Political Philosophy,” in *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, 29–37.

¹⁴¹ Pierpaolo Ciccarelli, *Leo Strauss tra Husserl e Heidegger: Filosofia pratica e fenomenologia* (Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2018), 7.

as a rigorous science implies a relentless questioning of the underlying *doxastic* certitude. In Husserl's view, since a lifetime would not be sufficient to accomplish the philosophical pursuit, the greatest danger for philosophy is the temptation to "renounce its rigorous epistemic vocation."¹⁴² In Ciccarelli's words, "the neglect of this 'infinite task' amounts to the demise of philosophy. The *Weltanschauungsphilosophie*...cannot be reconciled with the quest for *episteme*....Husserl did not realize that philosophy, as a rigorous science, conflicts with the *Weltanschauungsphilosophie*, and the conciliatory attempts it promotes."¹⁴³ While Strauss saw the essential character of the political conflict between philosophy as a rigorous science and *Weltanschauungsphilosophie*, Husserl seemed to take for granted "the liberal order of civil coexistence."¹⁴⁴ Philosophy consists in transcending the *doxa*; the political turn of philosophy depends on the awareness of the political aspects of this discontinuity. In Ciccarelli's account, the dualism of political philosophy and philosophy of history reflects the dualism of the ancient and modern art of writing. The only purpose of the modern art of writing, in fact, was the defense of philosophers from persecution, while, on the contrary, the purpose of ancient exotericism was to justify the possibility and necessity of philosophy by means of an elenctic examination of opinions. This lack of awareness of the paradoxical character of philosophy amounts to its "depoliticization" because it assumes "the ultimate solution of all ordinary ideological conflicts" and "the definitive emancipation from what constitutes the very essence of political affairs...its doxastic nature."¹⁴⁵ This problem finds its most extreme formulation in the thought of Heidegger. Like his modern predecessors, Heidegger did not resist the temptation of *Weltanschauungsphilosophie*. He conceived his thought as placed in the "absolute moment of history," and therefore assumed that "the 'political problem' [was] solved once and for all."¹⁴⁶ For this reason, by assuming the actuality of the end of history, he denied the nonhistorical character of the political conflict between philosophy and *doxa* and hence could not accomplish the turn to *political* philosophy strictly speaking. According to Ciccarelli, Heidegger's case is paradigmatic, since he explicitly denied the very possibility of a "natural understanding of the world." But since "the *endoxa* are...the

¹⁴² Ibid., 42.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 45.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 53.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 99.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 118.

‘natural’...point of departure of the ‘movement’ furthered by philosophy,”¹⁴⁷ Heidegger basically obfuscated the essentially political relationship of philosophy with *doxa*.

J. CLAUDIO CIANI AND THE ENDURING FASCINATION
WITH STRAUSS’S HOBBS

In 2018, Claudio Ciani’s *Leo Strauss lettore di Hobbes: Crisi della modernità e critica della religione* (Leo Strauss, reader of Hobbes: The crisis of modernity and the critique of religion) comes as a late confirmation of Italian scholars’ enduring fascination with Strauss’s reading of Hobbes. Ciani justifies his exclusive interest in Strauss’s interpretation of the author of the *Leviathan* by claiming that only through Hobbes can one understand “the core of Strauss’s thought as a whole, that is, the critical interpretation of philosophical modernity...and the recovery of a *philosophical radicalism*, which unavoidably goes back to classical antiquity.”¹⁴⁸ In his view, the main result of Strauss’s philosophical deconstruction of Hobbesian modernity amounts to a radical critique of the ethical foundations of the modern state: “the ethical-religious relativism of the modern state is not a rationally inescapable model; it is not an evident postulate of reason, which ‘rightly’ leaves religion to the realm of private opinion.”¹⁴⁹ On the contrary, this relativism is the ultimate issue of a foundational criticism of revelation. While he recognizes the foundational role played by Hobbes’s critique of religion in the genesis of his political science, Ciani does not embrace Strauss’s suggestion that Hobbes was a nonbeliever. In fact, Ciani maintains that to determine whether Hobbes was an atheist is an extremely difficult problem, and one that might not even be relevant. He justifies this claim by giving two reasons: on one hand, it is impossible to know what a man really thinks, and the works of Hobbes are so full of biblical quotations that we should take them seriously; on the other hand, Ciani suggest a distinction between “a personal atheism and a *methodological* atheism,”¹⁵⁰ to the effect that Hobbes’s methodological approach to science would not have necessarily harmed his personal faith: “even admitting that Hobbes resorted to a methodological atheism...it seems quite reasonable to maintain that he remained a sincere Christian, since that fact depends on his

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 120.

¹⁴⁸ Claudio Ciani, *Leo Strauss lettore di Hobbes: Crisi della modernità e critica della religione* (Rome: Nuova Cultura, 2018), 21.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 54.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 97.

faith, not on his scientific method... We prefer to stand with those who think that Hobbes was a believer.”¹⁵¹

K. DAVIDE MONACO ON THE YOUNG STRAUSS’S “AUTHENTIC” MAIMONIDES

Davide Monaco’s study *Religione e filosofia secondo Leo Strauss: Il percorso da Spinoza a Maimonide* (Religion and philosophy according to Leo Strauss: The path from Spinoza to Maimonides) (2018) deals with Strauss’s interpretation of Maimonides. The book offers a detailed historical reconstruction of the development of Strauss’s reading of Maimonides, but its main intention is theoretical. It aims, in effect, at the recovery of a specific view of the theologico-political problem, a view in which philosophy and revelation are not in conflict and do not exclude each other. According to Monaco, this view is the one defended by Strauss in *Philosophy and Law*,¹⁵² in contrast to all his later studies, including those on Maimonides. The bulk of Monaco’s book is devoted to the close examination of three different kinds of rationalism. These can be better understood if observed in their relation with revealed religion. On one hand, Spinoza’s “modern rationalism” is essentially empiricist; it “excludes from the scope of knowledge anything which has no empirical foundation,”¹⁵³ and therefore denies any cognitive value to revealed religion. The “radical rationalism” of Averroes and Farabi, on the other hand, asserts that human reason is capable of obtaining autonomously the teaching conveyed by revelation, that is, without the help of divine intervention. According to this position, there is no supernatural knowledge strictly speaking; revealed religion is only a political and pedagogical device to rule the many who are not capable of autonomous reasoning and investigation. Finally, Maimonides’s “moderate rationalism” asserts the existence of a kind of knowledge that is inaccessible to human reason on its own; this knowledge, concerning the nature of God and the creation of the world, can be obtained only through divine help, that is, through revelation. In this perspective, “revelation communicates fundamental theoretical truths”¹⁵⁴ which complete the insight of the philosophers. In Monaco’s own words, in order to “escape the torment” caused by unsolvable questions, “philosophy must open

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Leo Strauss, *Philosophy and Law: Contributions to the Understanding of Maimonides and His Predecessors*, ed. Eve Adler (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995).

¹⁵³ Davide Monaco, *Religione e filosofia secondo Leo Strauss: Il percorso da Spinoza a Maimonide* (Rome: Urbaniana University Press, 2018), 37.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 133.

itself to revelation, and embrace the answer coming from that higher source of knowledge.”¹⁵⁵ Therefore, revelation “is not just a political necessity...it also helps man to acquire those healthy and true notions about God that are necessary to reach beatitude.” Beatitude consist not in “moral perfection... but in knowledge about God.”¹⁵⁶ Monaco shows his sympathy for this kind of “moderate rationalism.” According to his Strauss, “there is no reason to reject revelation in order to be a philosopher.” For “the view according to which philosophy has to refute revelation in order to be a rational pursuit is a wholly modern idea.”¹⁵⁷ In different ways, “radical rationalism” and “modern rationalism” imply the self-deification of reason. Maimonides’s “moderate rationalism,” on the contrary, being open to revelation, prevents reason from trespassing its natural limits. According to Monaco, after *Philosophy and Law* Strauss progressively reduced Maimonides’s originality to the model of radical rationalism, ending by almost identifying Maimonides’s position with the one of Farabi or Averroes.

4. CONCLUSION

As is apparent from this overview, the reception of Strauss’s thought in Italy has experienced three main phases or “waves,” to adopt Strauss’s famous formula. The first wave almost silenced and rejected him. The second one discovered him; the third further explored the many features of his more elusive works. What strikes one as the most important characteristic of Italian scholarship, as I stated in my introduction, is the absence of an organized movement. It is the great variety of approaches and diversity of results that makes the readings offered by Italian scholars so interesting and multifaceted. Even though there was neither coordination nor communion of intents, they covered almost all aspects of Strauss’s thought. In this respect, I identify at least four major lines of research that, if combined, would represent a faithful prism of Strauss’s thought. (1) The first line regards as crucial the question of the crisis of modernity or, more precisely, of modern political philosophy. To this comprehensive category belongs the greater part of the publications discussed. Above all, it is Strauss’s reading of Hobbes as the founder of modern political science which fascinated many scholars. Similarly, Strauss’s critique of liberalism and his view of classic liberal education appeared to some as an antidote to the relativistic or nihilistic drift of modernity. (2) A second

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 164.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 169.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 108.

line concerns Strauss in dialogue with his contemporaries, that is, with other great philosophers and thinkers. In the first place, this comparative research focused on Strauss's debt to other authors (Cohen, Husserl, Heidegger); in the second place, it concentrated on a possible dialogue between Strauss and other thinkers with whom he had no occasion to start a philosophical conversation (Hayek). (3) A third area of interest regards Strauss as a reader of philosophers of the past. In this case, the question of the crisis of modernity stands in the background, and the research is guided above all by the interest in a different interpretation of great thinkers such as Plato or Maimonides, or for the innovative philosophical commentaries on the work of poets such as Aristophanes. In both cases, the theoretical layer of the research gains the upper hand over the merely historical one, since the Italian scholars appear to be aware of the sheer speculative meaning of Strauss's "return" to the great problems of philosophy. (4) The fourth area of research is characterized by the concentration on one of these problems, namely, the theologico-political problem, or the alternative between revelation and philosophy. Obviously, this denomination is quite comprehensive, since it encompasses also the studies on Jewish thought and the broader investigation of the possible ways to cope with the challenge of revealed religion. In particular, in this last group of studies the self-reflexive character of Strauss's political philosophy comes to the fore.

In order to bring to light the prism of Strauss's thought offered by Italian scholarship considered as a whole, I suggest the following systematization of the four subjects. The crisis of modernity appears as the starting point; since modern thought necessarily brings about its self-destruction in historicism, it is necessary to transcend its categories and adopt a different approach. In this sense, a comparison with other contemporary philosophers helps to characterize Strauss's own originality; political philosophy strictly understood is not tantamount to political theory or political thought. It must be primarily understood as a self-reflective movement of philosophical inquiry. By recovering the original meaning of Platonic political philosophy and the art of reading, Strauss made it possible to learn again from the great books of the past; in particular, he put at the center of his philosophical agenda the theologico-political problem as a permanent problem affecting every thoughtful human being in any epoch. Strauss transformed the historical study of philosophy into a philosophic tool. One could say that he saved the canon from the risk of becoming relegated to merely antiquarian studies; he freed the authors imprisoned by the Great Tradition by deconstructing

the Great Tradition. Such is Strauss's greatest bequest to the Italian philosophical culture.

This overview also allows one to see which subjects have not received much attention from Italian scholarship. I shall limit myself to two major unexplored areas. In the first place, it is quite surprising to note that, to this day, no Italian scholar has offered a monograph on Strauss as a reader of Machiavelli. There are of course some articles, but the absence of a book on the topic remains a fact that deserves some reflection. The reservation regarding Strauss's reading of Machiavelli could be due to the attitude of Italian scholarship towards Machiavelli, which tends to reject the idea that Machiavelli is the founder of modernity. To many, the main thesis of *Thoughts on Machiavelli*¹⁵⁸ appears too burdened by Strauss's own categories and therefore not helpful for any attempt to understand the author of *The Prince* and the *Discourses*. It can be useful to refer to just one example, namely, the opinion of Gennaro Sasso, perhaps the most authoritative scholar in the field, who recognized Strauss's great hermeneutical talent, but openly admitted his bewilderment: "the uncommon classical culture of this complex writer [sc. Strauss] is...made vain by the way in which he interprets Machiavelli's thought; to Strauss, Machiavelli is an evil 'thinker,' the self-conscious destroyer of the *Great Tradition*, the beginner of Enlightenment.... It seems evident that a discussion of such an interpretation implies a consideration of Strauss himself; and this is why I must give up such a discussion."¹⁵⁹

While Strauss's *Thoughts on Machiavelli* represents perhaps the most striking gap in Italian scholarship, there are works on other authors that have not gained much attention. For example, there are no monographs on Strauss's interpretation of modern thinkers such as John Locke, Edmund Burke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau; the Straussian reading of Spinoza, in its different phases, raised some interest, but did not provoke any scholarly reaction in the form of a monograph. Somehow, Strauss's Hobbes seems to catalyze permanently the attention of those scholars who want to deal with modern thought and possibly dismiss it. Likewise, a proper interpretation of Strauss's last works of the 1970s, on Plato's *Laws* and Xenophon's Socratic writings,¹⁶⁰ is still missing. But the second major area, still quite unexplored,

¹⁵⁸ Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1958).

¹⁵⁹ Gennaro Sasso, *Machiavelli e gli antichi e altri saggi*, vol. 1 (Milan: Ricciardi, 1986), 4–5n.

¹⁶⁰ Leo Strauss, *Xenophon's Socratic Discourse: An Interpretation of the "Oeconomicus"* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1970); Leo Strauss, *Xenophon's Socrates* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1972); Leo Strauss, *The Argument and the Action of Plato's "Laws"* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975).

about which I want to raise attention, is the possibility of a dialogue between Strauss's enterprise and Catholicism, seen from a Catholic perspective. Cubeddu, in this respect, contributed a pioneering effort (see above), but his classical liberal stance cannot by any means be identified as a Catholic treatment of, or answer to, Strauss's ambiguous philosophic provocation. It is true that Strauss's few remarks on Aquinas do not seem to justify a monograph, but, still, the key role of *Natural Right and History* in the Catholic natural law revival of the last decades is beyond doubt. Likewise, it would be interesting to read a Catholic rejoinder to Strauss's radical denial of the possibility of a synthesis between Jerusalem and Athens. Strauss seems to be, at the same time, a precious ally of, and an existential threat to, Christian thought in general. To date no Italian Catholic has offered a monograph on the subject.

In conclusion, one could observe that *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (in my opinion the Italian Straussians' least-loved book) conflates the two themes just highlighted: the commentary in which Strauss discusses in detail the masterpieces of the greatest Italian political philosopher of all time is also the place in which Strauss dedicates more words to the essence of Christianity than anywhere else. Machiavelli and Christianity are united in the formula "the problem of Machiavelli." This problem might represent Strauss's still unheard challenge to Italian secular and Catholic scholars.

