

# Interpretation

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## An Exchange

### Remarks on Timothy W. Burns's *Leo Strauss on Democracy, Technology, and Liberal Education*\*

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Tim Burns's recent book on Leo Strauss's views of democracy, technology, and liberal education is one of the best books that have been written on Strauss. It will be valuable to different types of readers. For general readers, it speaks to the crisis of modern liberal democracy, which many of us—perhaps all of us—sense is deepening, but the character of which is difficult to understand. By examining Strauss's view of the origins of that crisis, Burns's book can help us grasp that our current troubles are emerging, not as a bolt from the blue, but as the results of a transformation that has its roots in a complicated modern development. As Burns explains, Strauss was a friend of liberal democracy but not a flatterer of it. As a true friend, Strauss did not conceal or sugarcoat his view of the problems with a regime type and a way of life that may be the best currently available, but that are not for that reason without their flaws. At a moment when many are having a hard time thinking clearly and moderately about the problems we face, Burns's book can be a helpful guide. For more specialized readers, who come with a prior interest in Strauss and a familiarity with his main works, Burns's book offers a careful examination of some not so well known but exceptionally interesting

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\* Originally delivered at the Northeast Political Science Association annual meeting, November 11, 2021. The other three sets of remarks on the book are to be published, with replies, in the *Review of Politics*. Space did not allow for this response to the book, and reply, to be published with the others. —ed.

statements of Strauss, as well as a consideration of Strauss's relationship to Heidegger, which has not been sufficiently explored. More important, Burns takes an unflinching look at Strauss's critique of modern thought in all of its varieties. There is an understandable wish, which distorts the judgment of some followers of Strauss, to downplay Strauss's reservations about modern thought and practice, whether because those reservations call into question the simplicity or completeness of his support for our own regime as it was established by the American founders (see 84) or because they point to shortcomings and blind spots of genuine philosophers whom people prefer to admire rather than to criticize. But it is undeniable that Strauss was a critic of modern thought in all its forms. Burns brings out why that was so. Many Straussians will find his book jolting. They should find it jolting because Burns challenges some common misconceptions about Strauss.

I am convinced by most of the major claims Burns advances in his book. My guess, however, is that readers will be less interested in hearing me sing the praises of Burns's book by describing all the things I think he has gotten right than in considering one of my few reservations. So, with the caveat that what follows should not be mistaken for broad disagreement with Burns's outstanding book, let me explain my main reservation. I think that Burns overstates the centrality of the issue of technology in Strauss's critique of modern thought. Early in the book, Burns quotes a remark of Strauss from his famous essay "What Is Political Philosophy?" that "the difference between the classics and us with regard to democracy consists *exclusively* in a different estimate of the virtues of technology" (2, Burns's emphasis). Burns then remarks that "students of Strauss may well be surprised by that claim," and he notes that some "may even be (fairly) inclined to consider that statement (or even to dismiss it) as an exaggeration" (2). I am among those who regard it as an exaggeration. And that is especially so if one does not confine its bearings, as Burns does not, to the question of democracy alone, but makes it speak, more broadly, to the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns. Burns argues that Strauss "understood technological thinking to be at the very core of modern political philosophy" (2), that he saw it as the most important aspect of the modern assault on the biblical tradition (33, 57–58, 166), and that he regarded it as the decisive difference between ancient and modern philosophy as such (4, 7–8, 63, 70, 96–97).

The question of technology was surely important to Strauss because the rise of modern technology was—and still is—an important part of a broader development. But was it the most important part, the key for Strauss? There

are several reasons why that claim goes too far, in my view. First, if Strauss regarded the question of technology as the key to modernity, one would have expected him to focus his closest attention in studying the moderns on thinkers such as Bacon and Descartes, who led the way in the development of the new technological science, rather than on Machiavelli and Hobbes, in whom some steps in the direction of technological thinking can be found, but whose focus—and Strauss’s own focus in discussing them—is on moral and political matters. In his most decisive statements on modern thought—for instance, *Natural Right and History*, his several pieces on Hobbes, and *Thoughts on Machiavelli*—Strauss gives some attention to the early moderns’ prototechnological thinking, that is, their steps toward urging human beings to take control of fortune and nature. But that is not his primary focus in any of those statements. Rather, he gives his attention first and foremost to the moral and political transformation that Machiavelli, Hobbes, and others tried to effect—their lowering of the standards of moral and political life, their paving of the way to a more secular form of politics, their emphasis (at least in some cases) on individuals and their rights rather than citizens and their duties, and other such things. These aspects of Strauss’s analysis show up in Burns’s account; I do not mean to suggest that he is unaware of them. In fact, he has many illuminating things to say about them. But their importance seems to me to belie the centrality of technology for Strauss. Is this not a key difference between Strauss and Heidegger, who made technology so central in part because he did not pay nearly the same level of attention to the history of political philosophy? At any rate, I am not convinced that in his understanding of the relationship between the technological revolution of modern science and the moral-political revolution of modern political philosophy, Strauss thought that the technological impulse was in the driver’s seat from the very beginning. Rather than regarding technology as the key to the whole thing, he saw it, I believe, as a mere aspect of a multifaceted transformation, other parts of which have been more deeply impactful in shaping modern consciousness.

Let me conclude with a few remarks on the role of Machiavelli, whom Burns describes as “the founder of the technological project of putting theoretical science in the service of the political goal of the conquest of nature,” and as the man who thereby “launched modernity and its move toward democratic politics” (8). These claims go too far, in my view, because Machiavelli hardly ever speaks of theoretical science and, while he speaks about taking certain political steps to regulate fortune, he does not speak about a “conquest of nature,” but rather asserts nature’s unchanging character in at least some

crucial respects (see, for instance, *Discourses* I preface, II preface, III 43). Nor do I think Machiavelli's emphasis on "the effectual truth" is tantamount to a "technological shift toward efficient causality" (9), even if it implies a certain movement in that direction. (It is notable, too, that the statement of Strauss that most suggests that thought was made in an unpublished lecture and did not make it into *Thoughts on Machiavelli*.) As for Machiavelli's semiadvocacy of democracy, not only was it merely "semi," since he was very far from a principled democrat, but it can be explained by considerations that have little to do with technology: faced with what he regarded as the very problematic victory of Christianity in winning over the people, Machiavelli thought that it was necessary to win the people back, and that old prejudices that stood in the way of that ought to be tossed aside, both because they were based on false pretensions of moral superiority among aristocrats and because aristocratic politics had become a losing strategy in a world remade by Christianity. I suspect that, as a strictly political matter, Strauss did not wholly disagree with that assessment.