



BRILL

“Strauss-a-Lago”: Branding Trumpism as a Conservative Alternative

Claudia Franziska Brühwiler

PD Dr., Senior Lecturer in American Political Thought and Culture,
University of St.Gallen, School of Humanities and Social Sciences/Office of
the President, Dufourstrasse 48, 9000 St.Gallen, Switzerland
claudia-franziska.bruehwiler@unisg.ch

Abstract

When Donald J. Trump announced his presidential candidacy, it seemed as if conservative intellectuals formed a united front against his ideas and persona. Michael Anton challenged this perception in his essay “The Flight 93 Election” (2016) in which he framed Trumpism as the only viable alternative to a sclerotic conservatism. As Anton received support from a prominent West Coast Straussian, Charles Kesler, a debate ensued as to what extent Trumpism reflected Straussian ideas. References to philosopher Leo Strauss and the contextualization of Anton’s quest within a Straussian intellectual space served in part the intellectual branding of a populist strand of conservatism and its differentiation from liberalism. By suggesting a proximity between Straussianism and Trump’s political views, Anton and Kesler tried to provide the Trump candidacy and, eventually, the presidency with a narrative of intellectual legitimacy and continuity, while they could simultaneously build on the Straussian critique of liberalism.

Keywords

American conservatism – Michael Anton – Charles Kesler – Leo Strauss – Straussianism
– Donald J. Trump – Trumpism

Introduction

“Nevertheless one may say of it that it fiddles while Rome burns. It is excused by two facts: it does not know that it fiddles, and it does not know that Rome burns.” It was thus that Leo Strauss criticized the new political science in *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (1968, p. 223). The quote is eerily fitting to an ongoing debate within the conservative movement in the United States where the remnants of the traditional conservative coalition, forged between libertarians, neoconservatives, the Religious Right, and traditionalists (Critchlow, 2011; Nash, 1996), are determining their future in light of the populist strand that rose to power with President Donald J. Trump. Those conservatives who had hoped for a transitory period after Trump’s electoral defeat in November 2020 experienced a rude awakening with the attacks on the Capitol on January 6, 2021.

Those “who delight in pouring rhetorical gasoline on the country’s many smoldering civic conflicts” (Linker, 2021) and watched Rome burn, to keep Strauss’s image, were intellectuals who had sided with Trump during his first campaign and opposed the conservatives who stood for the slogan “Never Trump.” Traditional conservative outlets such as the *National Review*, the now defunct *Weekly Standard*, and with them many conservative intellectuals—including prominent Straussians—opposed both Trump’s nomination and his election. Yet a small group launched an intra-conservative discussion on the candidate’s merits and his impact on the conservative movement. The loudest shot, so to speak, originated in the *Claremont Review of Books*: In an essay titled “The Flight 93 Election” (Anton, 2016a), an author calling himself Publius Decius Mus urged conservatives to recognize the inevitability of voting for Trump. While normally only a select readership peruses the *Claremont Review*, Michael Anton’s essay reached thousands of people thanks to it being read out loud by the now deceased Rush Limbaugh (Goldberg, 2016), at the time the most popular conservative radio talk show host in the United States.

The attention for the essay also led to persistent interest in its publishing venue (Heilbrunn, 2017; Zerofsky, 2022): The *Review* is edited by members of the Claremont Institute, a think tank founded by students of Harry V. Jaffa, himself a student of Strauss. This affiliation reignited the discussion on Strauss’s alleged political legacy. During the presidency of George W. Bush, several scholars characterized Strauss as the godfather of the neoconservative ideology that underwrote the Bush doctrine (e.g., George, 2005; Mason, 2004; Norton, 2004). With the alleged “death” (Thompson & Brook, 2010) of neoconservatism towards the end of the Bush Administration, few people outside of academia gave Strauss and the Straussians further consideration.

While Anton's essay is not another instalment of what Grant Havers (2013) once called the "Strausskampf" (p. 78), this article suggests that the contextualization of Anton's quest within a Straussian intellectual space serves the intellectual branding of a populist strand of conservatism and its differentiation from liberalism. By suggesting a proximity between Straussianism and Trump's political views, Anton bestows "Trumpism" a narrative of intellectual legitimacy and continuity. True to Michael Freeden's (1996) analysis that conservatism reacts to liberalism "in looking-glass manner" (p. 337), Anton builds on the Straussian critique of liberalism to define what he considers to be at the core of Trumpist conservatism.

Straussianism, Briefly Defined

Leo Strauss and Straussianism

Leo Strauss (1899–1973) belongs to the generation of German exiled scholars who had a lasting influence on American academia and political theory. Like Eric Voegelin (1901–1985) and Hannah Arendt (1906–1975), he shaped several generations of thinkers, mostly during his professorship at the University of Chicago (1949–1968) and was subsequently turned into an "-ism." Said "-ism" is more important to the conservative defense of Trump than Strauss as such, yet the meaning of that "-ism" is just as contested as the core ideas of Strauss's writings. Stanley Rosen, a renowned Straussian, argued that all thinkers want "to do is to destroy their teachers" (Bai, 2000, np.), implying thus the legitimacy of a "distorting reading" (Duff, 2010, pp. 366–367). Such complications notwithstanding, Catherine and Michael Zuckert (2006) have identified the common denominator for all Straussians, namely a belief that:

Philosophy is important, that political philosophy is a viable enterprise, that philosophic texts must be read in a particularly attentive manner, that the distinction between ancients and moderns means something (although just what remains contested in Straussian circles) – these propositions are what individuals known as Straussians mostly agree about. (p. 267)

By stating that Straussians read texts "in a particularly attentive manner," the authors point to a methodological aspect that has led to many controversies and has also received its fair amount of ridicule.¹ Strauss (1941) argued

¹ As Georges Van Den Abbeele (1997) observed, unveiling the esoteric meaning of a text puts an "insurmountable burden of proof on the censorious reader with regard to the

that, under certain circumstances, philosophers need to conceal their actual thoughts and cannot express themselves openly. They still can, however, pass on their ideas “to trustworthy and intelligent readers only” (Strauss, 1941, p. 491):

Persecution cannot prevent even public expression of the heterodox truth, for a man of independent thought can utter his views in public and remain unharmed, provided he moves with circumspection. He can even utter them in print without incurring any danger, provided he is capable of writing between the lines.

STRAUSS, 1941, 490

The truth between the lines is, in Strauss’s diction, the esoteric text, while the exoteric text is accessible to a general readership. By giving close attention to the writer’s context and past writings, a schooled reader can reach the actual core of a text.

Most Straussians tend to limit their close readings to so-called “Great Books” or “the canon” (Goren & Lane, 2015, p. 3) in order to improve their understanding of the great questions of political thought.² The reverence for Great Books goes hand in hand with a hostility to, or at the very least critical attitude towards, those currents in philosophy and political science that put the former’s relevance into question, namely, relativism, deconstructivism, positivism, and advocates of empiricism in political science (Goren & Lane, 2015, p. 1).

Strauss’s students carried on their research in the spirit of their teacher, yet they started to disagree on some of his propositions and their consequences, particularly with regards to Strauss’s perception of the U.S. regime. Most commentators distinguish between two Straussian schools, namely the East Coast and the West Coast Straussians. The latter are generally regarded as more politically active (Goren & Lane, 2015, p. 2). While the geographic denominations have lost their significance, West Coast Straussians can still reference two distinct centers of thought, the Claremont Institute in California (hence the nickname “Claremonsters”) and Hillsdale College in Michigan (Gottfried, 2012, p. 59). In addition to these two camps, Zuckert and Zuckert (2006) identify a third group of so-called Midwest Straussians.

intentionality of the author” (p. 4). See also the scathing dissection of Strauss’s methodology by Blau (2012) and Lilla (2016).

2 As Strauss (1968) himself said: “We are compelled to live with books. But life is too short to live with any but the greatest books.” (p. 6).

The Zuckerts' threefold classification is arranged according to which of Strauss's propositions on America are rejected or deemphasized by the respective group of Straussians. These three propositions are:

1. America is modern.
2. Modernity is good.
3. America is good.

According to the Zuckerts (2006, pp. 200–201), East Coast Straussians question the third proposition—though they do not believe America is bad, they recognize its limitations. Midwest Straussians, in the Zuckerts' reading, disagree with Strauss's stance on modernity. Finally, the West Coast Straussians challenge the first tenet, America's modernity. In this belief, they draw from their key thinker, Jaffa, whose *Crisis of the House Divided* (1959) focused on the role of Abraham Lincoln in completing America's founding. According to Jaffa, Lincoln righted the wrong of America's birth, slavery, and "Aristotelianized" the American regime (Zuckert & Zuckert, 2014, p. 329). In these disputes, Leo Strauss's actual work tends to move out of focus (or, to refer to Rosen, possibly gets distorted), wherefore some scholars argue that Strauss has little to do with Straussianism.³

Straussianism Accused of Cultism

Were it not for the political success of its graduates as well as the many stories, prejudices, and myths surrounding its adherents, Straussianism could be treated as a school among many others in political philosophy and theory. A particular reverence for founding figures is not exclusive to them, as Anne Norton (2004) observes. However, Straussians differ from other schools of thought in the resistance they encounter. In contrast to (most) other thinkers, the association with Strauss leads to negative reactions that cannot be explained away as mere differences in opinion. Steven Smith explains that there are only two attitudes possible towards Strauss: "To know him is to either love him or hate him. There is no middle ground" (2006, pp. 156–157). Beyond that, Straussians are said "to keep to themselves, with an attitude of superiority" (Norton, 2004, p. 45). These aspects in combination with allegations of the persecution of alleged heretics has led many to conclude that Straussianism amounts to a cult (Howse, 2014, p. 4; Kaufmann, 1997, p. 29; Thompson & Brook, 2010).

3 Kenneth L. Deutsch (1999) is among many admirers of Strauss's work who are frustrated by the way it is ideologized: "[Strauss] was not an advocate of dogmatic capitalism or xenophobic patriotism or the justness of majoritarian democracy. He was certainly uninterested in protecting the oligarchic conservatives of old families. He rejected the conservative positivists who have become constitutional literalists defending the Constitution's alleged

As befits discussions of an alleged cult, both scholars and journalists writing about Strauss and Straussianism resort to language that is usually reserved to religions. Thus, for instance, Mark Lilla (2016) describes how intellectuals captivated by Strauss's work become blinded by faith:

His American followers have had difficulty seeing him in that light, as an original thinker whose example might help them to follow their own paths in thinking. They treat him less like Socrates than like Moses, and *Natural Right and History* as tablets brought down from the mountain. ... It is a script. But unlike the script one might be taught in a European high school, along with others, this script gave the United States an important place in the unfolding of a single story. (pp. 57–58)

Other scholars and critics describe Straussianism as an “orthodoxy” with problematic “dogmata” (Neumann, 2018) or Jaffa as “Strauss’s representative on American soil” (Richter, 2017, p. 15)⁴ whose writings are allegedly “gospel” (Meyer, 2017, 12) to some adherents. Such condemnations and conspiracy theories surrounding Strauss and his “disciples” have kept the interest in him alive outside the circle of initiates, and they have provided a fertile soil for the most recent rediscovery. The mere suspicion that the Trump candidacy might be supported by Straussians or that Straussianism might provide an intellectual foundation for “Trumpism” helped Anton garner attention. In other words, by establishing a link between Straussianism and Trump, he tapped a reservoir of ideas and prejudices.

From Athens to Mar-a-Lago: An Intra-Conservative Feud

Charging the Cockpit: A Salvo against Never Trumpers

Trump’s 2016 triumph in the Republican primaries led to a crisis within the U.S. conservative movement. Conservative columnist David Brooks (2016) called the then impending nomination a “Joe McCarthy moment” (np.) for the party and the conservative movement, and the magazine *National Review* spearheaded the opposition of intellectuals and pundits from different strands

support for states’ rights, thereby rejecting the best part of the American liberal democratic tradition of the Declaration of Independence and the statesmanship of Lincoln. For Strauss, parts of our tradition were better and parts were worse.” (pp. 58–59).

4 My translation. Original: “Jaffas Nachfolger als Straussens Stellvertreter auf amerikanischer Erde.”

of U.S. conservatism who spoke out against Trump. These so-called “Never Trumpers” only late acknowledged a comparable (though not as numerous) conservative opposition, namely intellectuals defending and supporting Trump’s candidacy. Since the latter were (however loosely, in some cases) affiliated with the Claremont Institute and thus with West Coast Straussianism, the intra-conservative feud relaunched the question to what extent Straussians are present in U.S. politics.

In September 2016, an author borrowing his pseudonym from Roman Antiquity, Publius Decius Mus, published “The Flight 93 Election” (Anton, 2016a) in the *Claremont Review of Books*.⁵ In no uncertain terms, he made the case for the candidacy of Trump, claiming that it was the ultimate chance for conservatives to bring the United States of America back on the right track. The essay title and the pseudonym alone expressed the urgency of the author’s statements. The passengers of said flight 93 had sacrificed their own lives on September 11, 2001, to prevent their kidnappers from causing an even bigger catastrophe. In the same spirit, Publius Decius Mus is the name of a Roman consul who sacrificed his life in a battle by the Vesuv.⁶ Fitting these para-texts, the author—later revealed to be Anton—opens his essay with a dramatic declaration, namely that “2016 is the Flight 93 election: charge the cockpit or you die. You may die anyway. You—or the leader of your party—may make it into the cockpit and not know how to fly or land the plane. There are no guarantees” (Anton, 2016a, np.).

When Trump’s 2016 campaign manager Steve Bannon described the publication of the essay “The Flight 93” as a “seminal moment” (Gray, 2017, np.), he put the author, and with him West Coast Straussians, on the Trumpian map: The essay was published in a West Coast Straussian journal, *Claremont Review of Books*, and its author had earned a degree from Claremont Graduate University. Anton, the man behind the pseudonym, would eventually be hired by the Trump Administration in strategic communications and would afterwards become a lecturer at Hillsdale College. The essay’s publication in the *Claremont Review* suggested that its editors were sympathetic to its general direction. From early on in favor of Trump’s quest (Kesler, 2015), though doubtful about his prospects as a candidate, the *Review’s* editor-in-chief Charles R. Kesler would start pointing out the merits in Publius’s arguments, leading the latter to assume an “esoteric endorsement” (Anton, 2016a, np.). Kesler, a

5 Anton would expand on his essay later in *After the Flight 93 Election* (2019a) and reiterate many of his points in *The Stakes* (2020a). The books would, however, not have the same traction as his essays did.

6 Ironically, the author shielded his own identity and thus, as he admitted to Sannéh (2017), his livelihood.

student of Jaffa, a careful reader of Strauss, and a proud “Claremonster”—a supporter of Trump, seemingly in league with Publius alias Anton? For the press, this alliance was sufficient to suggest that the intellectual defense of Trump amounted to the resurfacing of Straussianism.

The Claremont Institute also underscored its own importance in the new Administration, with its board chairman claiming that: “Many Claremonsters have the ear of this administration and may help Trump take what he feels in his gut and migrate it to his head. ... This is Claremont’s moment. This is a time to judge Claremont by its press. The more bad press, the better” (qtd. in Schuessler, 2017, np.). Finally, that very press—both in the United States and abroad—further accentuated the perception that Straussians were again relevant. Longer reports on the resurgence of Straussian influences in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Baskin, 2017), *The New York Review of Books* (Heilbrunn, 2017), and *The New Yorker* (Sannéh, 2017) were echoed in the German, Swiss, and Spanish press, which highlighted that Trump’s isolationism and antagonistic foreign policy ideas as well as his anti-progressive stance were in line with Straussian ideas (Assheuer, 2018, p. 41; Rábago, 2018, np.). A journalist from Tanzania went even further and recognized parallels between Strauss and Trump: “Like Strauss, Donald Trump uses his esoteric methods to hide his hidden agenda against certain groups” (Mjarsiri, 2016, np.). While no other observer went that far, few actually refuted the links between Strauss and Trump, as did, for instance, professor emeritus Micha Brumlik (2018) in the German weekly *Die Zeit*: “It is hard to imagine that Leo Strauss would have seen in Trump anything but a vulgar boor, someone who is striving to become a tyrant and thus should be discharged as quickly as possible” (p. 38).⁷ The interest in Claremont and its graduates subsided only briefly, and it spiked again with the storm on the Capitol, as its faculty member John Eastman came under scrutiny for his involvement as Trump’s lawyer.⁸

The Quest for True Conservatism: Straussianism as Symbolic Association

The dead speak to us only through their work, which makes it a futile quest to figure out whether Strauss would have approved of Trump’s candidacy. But we can discuss how the dead and their texts are used to imply intellectual kinship

7 My translation. Original: “Es ist kaum vorstellbar, dass Leo Strauss in Donald Trump etwas anderes gesehen hätte als einen vulgären Rüpel, ja geradezu als jemanden, der eine Art Tyrannis anstrebt und der deshalb so schnell wie möglich aus dem Amt gejagt werden sollte.”

8 See thereon, for instance, Field (2021) for a detailed account, or Fischer and Stanley-Becker (2021) and Zerofsky (2022).

where it might not exist to the extent suggested. To this end, sociologist Dominik Bartmanski (2011, pp. 11–12) has coined the useful terms “symbolic (dis)association” and “intellectual (dis)ambiguation” that aid, in his reading, thinkers to reach iconic status or, as seems more fitting in this case, to brand their ideas. Symbolic (dis)association signifies the positioning of one’s ideas in the context of the dominant theories, by clearly embracing a school of thought or starkly opposing it. “Symbolic” does not mean that the association is baseless and merely on the surface; instead, it emphasizes that the symbolic value of the association is key, i.e., it matters mostly how the association affects readers, other scholars, the public, et al. Intellectual (dis)ambiguation consists in formulating a theory that does not have to be easily accessible or clear; in fact, a certain enigmatic quality may contribute to a theory’s iconicity just as much as a shock-element.

Anton’s symbolic association is evident as the publishing venue for his essay “Flight 93” (2016a) is a sign of intellectual belonging. Kesler’s support and Anton’s own academic background, including publications such as an appreciation of Jaffa’s legacy (Anton 2014/2015), further highlight his inclusion in Straussian circles. More importantly, Anton repeatedly signals familiarity with Strauss’s work, which he underlined in later essays. For instance, Anton (2016d) commented on the distinction between the different Straussian schools and on the debate between Strauss and Alexandre Kojève (1902–1968) that had ensued in reaction to the former’s publication of *On Tyranny* (1948). One may also detect a bow towards Strauss (or, depending on one’s viewpoint, an act of pretension or even insolence) when Anton titles his rejoinder to his critics “Restatement on Flight 93”(2016b), thus reminding the initiated reader of Strauss’s “Restatement on Xenophon’s *Hiero*” (1954).

In a first instance, Anton and Kesler both use their references to Strauss to further disassociate their support for Trump from “Never Trump” conservatism: While “movement conservatives” considered Trump anything but a true conservative, Anton and Kesler tried to associate him with a different type of conservatism that tends to be misunderstood in the first place. Linking support of Trump’s candidacy with Straussianism is thus at once an act of symbolic association and disassociation: Trump thus gains a conservative pedigree, but that pedigree is removed from conservatism traditionally understood. To this end, Anton faults conservatism just as much as liberals for the status quo: The United States, in his reading, has reached an abyss, and that most leaders within the conservative movement have failed to recognize the dire need for renewal. A suicidal society that has lost its sense of unity has put itself at the mercy of a globalist elite that committed to principles that will harm their own nation. Specifically, Anton (2016a) castigates the “sacredness of mass

immigration” that unites politicians left and right who are content with “the ceaseless importation of Third World foreigners with no tradition of, taste for, or experience in liberty” (np.). In his reading, conservatives have bought into such globalist narratives and lost any sense of and commitment to the fundamental principles of their alleged creed, caring only about conservatism as an enterprise (“Conservatism Inc.”) and electoral prospects. Kesler joins Anton’s quest for a “true” conservatism and sees no obstacle in Trump never having been “a movement conservative” (Kesler 2017a, np.) who would have to fight over the Republican Party’s “definition of conservatism, trying to stretch an orthodoxy, or a clutch of orthodoxies, to accommodate a governing majority” (Kesler 2017a, np.). For both Kesler and Anton, Trump, by contrast, has recognized the signs of the time: “The truth is that Trump articulated, if incompletely and inconsistently, the right stances on the right issues—immigration, trade, and war—right from the beginning” (Anton, 2016a, np.).

Straussianism’s enigmatic quality and the host of conspiracy theories it has inspired, as well as the relative isolation of Straussians in academia, render the liaison between Strauss and Anton more believable in the public eye. Probably to the chagrin of East Coast and Midwest Straussians, the rather inaccessible nature of Strauss’s work further helps Anton’s case as few, if any, of those critics spreading “Straussophobia” (Minowitz, 2019) in the public realm will have the time to study Strauss’s work. Due to associations with the Iraq invasion, the mere mention of Straussianism may even have a shock effect that further heightens attention. Finally, by first publishing the essay under a pseudonym, Anton added to the suspense and increased the attention for the Straussian support of Trump.

Anton has thus prepared the ground for the type of conservatism he and other Claremonsters would like to take root. For Anton, the conservative movement as it has taken shape since the end of World War II is dead—yet conservatism as such will live: “Truth is true. Conservatism’s genuine insights will live on, no matter what shallow, false ideology appropriates its name” (Anton, 2016c, np.). While not quite as definite in his condemnation, Kesler criticizes the “self-contentment” (Kesler, 2018a) of what they consider the conservative mainstream that has allowed that the Republican Party contented itself with dominating economic policy while allowing moral rules being determined by the political left. Kesler sees an opportunity in Trump’s populism to “to move both conservatism and the Republican Party closer to their former selves” (2017a, np.), a return to a pure constitutionalism (2018a).⁹

9 Anton (2020b) later described Trump as a president without a party as he stood for an ideological revolution: “He ran against them and won—and most of them will never forgive him” (np.).

Liberalism as the Ideological Other

The symbolic association between Trump and Straussianism does not only serve to give his candidacy an instant conservative pedigree and simultaneously differentiate it from movement conservatism. It also aids the disassociation from other schools of Straussianism, i.e., from East Coast Straussianism and Midwest Straussianism, and, more importantly, from liberalism as the ideological foe or "Other." Anton's and Kesler's critique of liberalism touches on Straussian preoccupations, namely (1) multiculturalism and political correctness, (2) higher education, and (3) the necessity to return to foundational values, yet the discussion of the last is distinctly West Coast Straussian. All three issues are variations of the overall question as to how Strauss viewed liberalism, a question that has led to numerous controversies and is riddled with accusations against both Strauss himself and Straussians of all shades: Strauss and Straussians have been said to be anything from critical friends of liberal democracy to outright anti-democratic authoritarians—and all of these readings have been supported by interpretations of Strauss's writings, making all of them persuasive depending on the readers' angle and their own understanding. In the case of Anton and Kesler it is thus of less interest to what extent their alleged Straussianism reflects "true" Straussianism, as each camp would claim that title for itself. Instead, this paper's the focus is on how Anton and Kesler use Strauss's work and Straussian reasonings

Multiculturalism and Political Correctness. In Anton's and Kesler's perspective, American society no longer upholds the virtues that once made it great, and they blame both academia and liberal progressives in general for these changes. Specifically, they criticize that a type of relativism is forced upon the country: A multiculturalist agenda promotes the synchronicity of competing values and de-legitimizes the prioritization of those considered "American." In daily life, this multiculturalism manifests itself in the practice of political correctness (PC), the attack on which Kesler (2016a, 2016b, 2016c) regarded as a cornerstone of Trump's campaign. In that, Kesler (2016b)—similarly to Anton—saw a clear reaction against relativization and/or revilement of America's merits: "[Trump's] savvy opposition to PC implies something like his defense of America, because there is nothing political correctness stands for so much as the denigration of America, its history and principles" (np.). For Kesler (2016a, np.), political correctness cannot be justified by the need for mutual respect of differences, as it has instead morphed into "a new ensemble of required moral attitudes" (Kesler, 2016a, np.) that leave no room for dissent: "Political correctness is a serious and totalist politics" (Kesler, 2016a, np.).

While Kesler does not reference Strauss (or Jaffa), Anton sees their stance against multiculturalism corroborated by Straussian thought. Referencing Strauss's exchange with Kojève, he (2016d) claims:

with absolute confidence that a core issue in that debate is identical to the core issue of the 2016 U.S. presidential election: globalism versus nationalism, universalism versus particularism, levelling similarity versus genuine diversity, the “universal and homogenous state” versus a heterogeneous community of separate and distinct nations. Strauss clearly sides with the latter. Which is to say, in the context of 2016, with Trump. (np.)

As Angel Torres (2018) showed, Strauss would probably object to being classified as a nationalist or a defender of the nation state per se, but Anton is right to allude to Strauss in his anti-relativistic stance. For indeed, Strauss criticized modern liberalism's nihilism and its proposition that our principles are merely an “arbitrary collection of value judgments” (Smith, 2006, p. 187). As Strauss argued in *Natural Right and History* (1953/1965): “Once we realize that the principles of our actions have no other support than our blind choice, we really do not believe in them any more” (p. 6). With the arbitrariness of values comes the assumption of the broadest tolerance possible on which multiculturalism as depicted by Anton and Kesler depends. In this regard, they follow Strauss's reasoning, for he remarked in the context of liberal education that “absolute tolerance is altogether impossible; the allegedly absolute tolerance turns into ferocious hatred of those who have stated most clearly and most forcefully that there are unchangeable standards founded in the nature of man and the nature of things” (Strauss, 1968/1995, p. 63).

Anton and Kesler build on this line of thinking to condemn the development of liberal thought and the constraints on society that stem thereof, letting readers contemplate the ostensibly freer, value-driven conservative alternative. For according to them and in line with Strauss's observation on the impossibility of “absolute tolerance,” current American society is the least tolerant of those who believe in “unchangeable standards.” Thereby, they conveniently avoid a discussion of more moderate liberal attitudes on pluralism that bear little resemblance to the nihilistic version of liberalism as it has been depicted by Strauss.

Critique of Higher Education. Attacks against relativism, multiculturalism, and the questions surrounding political correctness are twinned with debates on the role of higher education. It has become commonplace in American conservatism to criticize the alleged influence of universities, of liberal arts colleges in particular, and to blame liberals for higher education's alleged moral

decline. Many of these critics have been inspired by Strauss's work (Peters, 2008), and Anton is no exception: In his role as Publius and beyond, Anton laments the role of universities as an "opinion-making element," claiming that they are, just like the media, "wholly corrupt and wholly opposed to everything we want, and increasingly even to our existence" (2016a, np.). Again, Anton mirrors the status quo from his perspective and urges his readers to acknowledge the necessity to halt current developments.

For informed readers, the link to Strauss's critique of higher education is evident, without Anton signalling it. Education is key in Strauss's thinking as it is "the ladder by which we try to ascend from mass democracy to democracy as originally meant": "Liberal education is the necessary endeavour to found an aristocracy within democratic mass society. Liberal education reminds those members of a mass democracy who have ears to hear, of human greatness" (1968/1995, p. 5). Yet Strauss deplored liberal education's failure to provide students with actual guidance as it succumbed to the doctrine of tolerance which "becomes perverted into the abandonment of all standards and hence of all discipline":¹⁰ "Scholarship, which is meant to be a bulwark of civilization against barbarism, is ever more frequently turned into an instrument of rebarbarization." (1968/1995, p. 63)

Although they did not do so directly, Anton and Kesler would add that the "wrong" type of scholarship and education turned into such "an instrument of rebarbarization," while their own scholarship and lecturing could indeed function as the much-needed bulwark.

Return to Foundational Values and the Crisis of Liberal Democracy. The pre-occupation with the American founding, the return to its principles, and the alleged transformations of the American regime since the 1960s, deplored by both Anton and Kesler (2017b, np.), are distinctly West Coast Straussian, yet not necessarily linked to Strauss himself. Although he opens his best-known book, *Natural Right and History* (1953), with a skeptical look at the United States, Strauss never focused in detail on the American regime:

The nation dedicated to this proposition has now become, no doubt partly as a consequence of this dedication, the most powerful and prosperous

10 Allan Bloom would later build on Strauss's arguments and present his damning verdict of higher education's relativistic and nihilistic approach in the bestseller *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987). He opens the book with the observation that there "is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative" (Bloom, 1987, p. 25). More recently Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt reignited the debate on intellectual homogeneity on US campuses, with a clear reference to Bloom: *The Coddling of the American Mind* (2018).

of the nations of the earth. Does this nation in its maturity still cherish the faith in which it was conceived and raised? Does it still hold those ‘truths to be self evident’?

STRAUSS, 1953/1965, p. 1.¹¹

By contrast, the “father” of West Coast Straussianism, Jaffa, did focus on the American regime, yet he would hardly have been sympathetic to Anton’s (2016d) outburst:

Progressives and liberals have been shouting for well over a century that the original American regime was flawed, flawed, flawed—racist, sexist, undemocratic; you know the list. The solution: change, change, change! Which they mostly accomplished. It’s funny how, when liberals talk about this, it’s always cited as one of liberalism’s greatest accomplishments. We replaced the rule of dead, white, slave-owning males with a Progressive, Living Constitution! But when anyone on the Right agrees—Yep, you sure did change the regime—the Left fulminates against us as dangerous radicals. This is gaslighting of a very high order. (np.)

For Jaffa (1959), the American regime required one key change after its founding that was achieved through Lincoln’s presidency and the abolition of slavery. West Coast Straussians Anton and Kesler circumvent addressing that particular transformation so that they need not inquire whether the founding had not indeed been “flawed.” Instead, they accuse liberals of tarnishing the American regime, with the conservative movement and the Republican Party complicit in doing so when they repeatedly made concessions in cultural and social aspects. Both Anton and Kesler are thus less concerned with questions of Trump’s character and would later consider the impeachments illegitimate (Anton 2016a, 2016b, 2019b, 2020c, 2020/2021; Kesler, 2016c, 2018a, 2018c, 2020/2021); instead, they point to Trump’s potential to restore American order. For Anton, this included restoring power to those who “had not been heard in at least 30 years” (2020/2021, np.) and would guarantee Trump’s triumph in 2016, which Kesler essentially backs when he speaks of the need for a return to Jacksonian democracy (2017a). In other words, both Kesler and Anton do not

11 See also Bloom in *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987/2012): “Cultural relativism succeeds in destroying the West’s universal or intellectually imperialistic claims, leaving it to be just another culture. ... The United States is one of the highest and most extreme achievements of the rational quest for the good life according to nature” (p. 39).

only diagnose America from suffering under a crisis of liberalism, but a crisis of democracy. Therein, they depart from Strauss's writings.

Strauss's support for democracy has been questioned repeatedly by critics as he believed aristocracy to be more attuned to human nature and thus suggested the necessity to cultivate an elite within democracies who could assume the responsibility to govern. Yet he did believe representative democracy to be the best suited regime for our time, as Horst Mewes (2004) observed, though democracy of a particular kind: "Strauss represented a type, and that is the Federalist's democratic republic. The type of democracy that is essentially based on a representative republic governed by an elected, natural aristocracy of merit" (p. 189). Instead of liberal democracy, Strauss saw liberalism as such in crisis (Lord, 1999, p. 415), for some of the reasons that made him critical of the developments outlined in the previous subsections. And while Anton and Kesler identified in Donald Trump the type of man who could both salvage the American regime and help it overcome the crisis of liberalism, Strauss would have focused on the factor the two, in particular Kesler, continuedly tried to ignore: his character. Elites who have taken the educational ladder to aristocracy need to set the tone in Strauss's conception of representative democracy, with the "gentleman" being best suited to lead. In Strauss's understanding, which is reminiscent of James Madison's idea of the propertied class being best equipped to lead the nation, a gentleman is a "political reflection or imitation of the wise man" (Strauss, 1953/1965, p. 142) whose practical wisdom equips him to govern prudently. Kesler repeatedly tried to portray Trump as such a leader. But by pointing more to Trump's "intuition" rather than his actual behavior and intellectual merits he unmasked how little he trusted his own argument.

Conclusion: Back to Athens?

In the run-up of the election in 2020, Anton (2020c) drowned liberal worries of an authoritarian coup by suggesting that those calling out against authoritarianism are the ones true conservatives should be worried about: "If there is a conspiracy to remove President Trump from office even if he wins, they're telling you about it precisely to get you ready for it, so that when it happens you won't think it was a conspiracy; you'll blame the president. Don't be fooled." (np.) Weeks later, Kesler (2020/2021) would condemn the attacks on the Capitol: "No citizen, no constitutionalist, no conservative could regard that day's outrages with anything but dismay and indignation" (np.). But both he and Anton kept up the ideological mirror and criticized liberals for their alleged hypocrisy

and vengefulness. In contrast to the rioters and looters who ransacked cities in the wake of George Floyd's death in May 2020, the "vast majority of those who went to the Capitol did so without plan" (Anton, 2020/2021) and caused little harm, at least in their perception. An impeachment was thus, again, illegitimate and a sign of liberal hypocrisy and partisanship.

Anton's and Kesler's quest to define "true conservatism" has not ended with the Trump presidency and it has brought them even further into conflict with "movement conservatism." While they have never clearly delineated what should be understood by "Trumpism," they keep seeing the future in a populist conservatism that forces the Republican Party to adopt a more leftist economic agenda (Anton, 2020b, 2020/2021). After the Bush presidency, Strauss's admirers withdrew to their personal Athens, the proverbial ivory towers of higher education, yet the "Claremonsters" on the West Coast intend to take a different route. Kesler (2020/2021) prophesizes that "Trumpism has a future, even without Trump's continuing political presence; indeed, it's possible it may have a brighter future without him" (np.). Said future, though, no longer requires a symbolic association with Strauss: Kesler and Anton have successfully tied their brand of conservatism in the political imagination with Strauss, and they can now rely on the newly gained prominence of the Claremont Institute to spread their visions of conservatism.

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