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*Freedom as Nationalism: Leo Strauss, Isaiah Berlin and Revolution*

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**Abstract:**

Leo Strauss and Isaiah Berlin developed theories of freedom that were influenced by their conceptions of nationalism. Despite differences in their theories, each ties freedom to nationalism in a manner that preserves political and cultural differences between groups and elevates the political and philosophical importance of value conflict. Strauss promotes an exceptionalist theory of freedom, which is tied to national greatness, military glory, authoritarian power, and social hierarchy. Berlin's freedom fosters a pluralist nationalism, which nurtures the human need for group belonging and values cultural differences above universal rights. Both theorists develop their concepts of freedom and nationalism in order to counter the revolutionary threat of Marxism, which they believed was premised on a post-national conception of freedom. To counter Marxism, they emphasized the political, natural and cultural differences between people, the importance of group power and identity over universal human rights, and the permanent role nations play in human history. In recovering the counterrevolutionary context of their arguments, I will show how their notions of freedom influenced the ideological battles of the Cold War and how their theories continue to influence conservative and liberal politics today.

## Research Objective

Leo Strauss and Isaiah Berlin developed distinct ways of thinking about freedom, which have been influential in shaping conservative and liberal politics. Despite a proliferation of scholarship on Strauss and Berlin, little effort has been made to examine the relationship between freedom and nationalism in their political theories, or to analyze how their distinct ideas found common ground in the battle against Marxism during the Cold War and against universal principles and revolutionary thought more generally.

Strauss and Berlin developed their respective theories during a time of world-historical change. In the post-World War I era, national self-determination ushered in the end of great empires and the ideal of world peace generated a new experiment with institutionalized global order in the form of the League of Nations. But this was also an era of ideological movements and revolutionary politics, a time when communism and fascism began to challenge liberalism for influence throughout a modernizing world. The onset of World War II seemed to destroy the dream of world peace through global institutions. The end of the war destroyed the legitimacy of fascism. With the Cold War, American liberalism and Soviet communism competed for influence in the developed world and throughout a decolonizing third world. It is in this historical and political context that Strauss and Berlin nurtured new ways of thinking about freedom designed to shape the struggle against Marxism.

Strauss and Berlin are often characterized as Cold War thinkers, but insufficient attention has been paid to the way they used the idea of freedom to promote a kind of nationalism that could counter Marx's theory of historical progress. The ideological battle against communism led defenders of liberal democracy to abandon universal principles and align themselves with the forces of nationalism. To challenge communism, Strauss and Berlin attacked the universal and revolutionary principles of both communism and of liberal democracy. In countering revolutionary communism, they revised conservative and liberal conceptions of western democracy.

Straussian “conservatism” and Berlinian “liberalism” are misnomers. Strauss’s theories neither conserve nor embrace the tradition of modern thought that gave rise to liberal democracy. Berlin’s critique of the revolutionary tradition within liberal thought suggests that his theory of pluralism is more conservative than it is liberal. Their Cold War vision of freedom as nationalism led to a transformation of liberal democracy. Strauss and Berlin offered fundamentally different visions of change, but both saw the fight against communism as a fight against universalism, which involved countering Enlightenment principles within modern thought and the revolutionary tradition within liberal democracy.

Strauss’s exceptionalist theory is premised on the notion that modern thought leads to nihilism: the universal principles at its core strip politics and philosophy of the power to provide meaning and purpose to human lives (Strauss 1961, 238). Strauss thought that both liberalism and communism were plagued by this nihilism. He believed that human differences are the basis for excellence and achievement and that equality subdues man’s competitive instincts and undermines the possibilities for greatness. Strauss claimed that liberalism shares with Marxism the same Enlightenment belief that all men are free and equal and that social hierarchy is unnatural and unjust. Such a notion left people with nothing meaningful to believe in and fight for. In the struggle against communism, he saw a solution to what he called the “crisis of modernity” (Strauss 1959). The solution entailed returning to early modern thought and reconstructing a concept of freedom based on pre-modern principles of hierarchy, sacrifice, and duty. By promoting heroic conceptions of politics, inspiring the rise of a new philosophic elite, and rejuvenating the pursuit of national greatness, Strauss’s theories transformed received opinions about liberal democracy.

Berlin framed the Marxian challenge to liberalism differently because he believed the solution could be found within liberal thought. He recognized that the battle against communism would require internal changes in liberal ideals, but unlike Strauss, Berlin tied his defense of liberalism to a critique of

absolutism and authoritarianism. He did not seek to reanimate pre-modern principles, but his vision did require, as did Strauss's, a rejection of universalism and an embrace of particularism. But where Strauss's exceptionalism promotes the view that human differences entail an assertion of ourselves as better than others, Berlin's pluralism teaches that differences distinguish us as unique from others. In the process, Berlin reifies cultural differences, treats values as incommensurable, and value conflict as inevitable. Berlin's is not a liberalism rooted in universal principles of reason or natural rights. He argues that humans need to belong to particular groups, that identity is shaped by the distinct values of such groups, and that individuals are happiest and most creative when living among their own people. There is a tension between Berlin's pluralistic theory of group belonging and his defense of individual liberty, but his efforts to reconcile these principles serves to push liberalism away from universalism and towards nationalism.

How we think about freedom matters. When freedom is tied to even liberal forms of nationalism its possibilities are limited, and mutual understanding between groups becomes more difficult. What was said about religion in previous eras applies to nationalism in the modern world: it can be a unifying force, nourishing the community and enriching individual lives, but it can also be divisive, reinforcing social hierarchies and intensifying political and cultural tensions. I will argue that when freedom is aligned with nationalism and used to undermine universalist ideals, it is a counterrevolutionary force. America changed during the Cold War. The freedom that was once a revolutionary force was transformed into its opposite.

### **Theoretical Framework and Substantive Focus**

The literature on Strauss and Berlin has not sufficiently addressed how their theories were developed in opposition to Marxian thought and the role their ideas played in the Cold War. Even as it is widely acknowledged that both were Cold War thinkers, the importance of that political context has not been adequately reflected or understood in the scholarship.

There is much truth in Steven Smith's claim that Strauss had more in common with Cold War liberals like Isaiah Berlin than with most conservatives of his day (Smith 2007, 15). Yet when Smith and other Strauss scholars argue that Strauss was a true friend of liberal democracy, they withhold more than they disclose. Scholars influenced by Strauss divide the world according to regime types, where "democracies" are friends and "tyrannies" are enemies (Schulsky and Schmitt 1999, 2). For these scholars, the Cold War was a global conflict between the American-led free world and its Soviet-led communist enemy. Any thinker committing themselves to the battle against communism was, according to this argument, a friend of liberal democracy, no matter how liberal or democratic their commitments. After immigrating to the US, Strauss became a friend of liberal democracy in that sense: he had always been a critic of communism and believed that America had a special role to play in defeating it (Zuckert 2006, 74). But this emphasis on his critique of communism obscures the fact that Strauss was also a lifelong critic of liberalism. Strauss's review of Carl Schmitt's *Concept of the Political* demonstrates his profound opposition to liberal principles (Strauss 1932). Heinrich Meier has sought to distinguish Strauss from Schmitt by emphasizing the fundamental difference between political philosophy and political theology, but Meier admits that Strauss may have understood Schmitt's concept of the political better than Schmitt himself (Meier 1995). This does not alone make Strauss a fascist, but in the recently published personal correspondence between him and Karl Löwith, Strauss acknowledges his early commitment to the "Principles of the Right: fascist, authoritarian, imperial," which confirms what Strauss himself cryptically alludes to in an autobiographical preface written later in life for the republication of his early work on Spinoza (Strauss 1933, Strauss 1997). His supporters claim that after moving to the US and learning the lessons of World War II, Strauss gave up the fascist sympathies of his early years and became a friend of liberal democracy (Tarcov 2006).

Strauss's critics emphasize that he maintained a committed and principled rejection of the values of liberal democracy. Stephen Holmes understands and demonstrates the antiliberal nature of

Strauss's thought. Holmes argues that Strauss rejects the belief that free thought and open discussion serve the public good, that Strauss claims separating religion and myth from politics is impossible and foolish, that rulers must stand above and beyond the law, and that liberalism is philosophically unable to defend itself against enemies because it refuses to accept the friend/enemy distinction (Holmes 1996, 64). Because Holmes focuses on Strauss's philosophic critique of liberalism and does not situate Strauss's theories in a Cold War context, he does not reflect on how Strauss sought to use freedom to oppose the universalist ideals of both communism and liberalism. C. Bradley Thompson argues that not only is Strauss an enemy of liberal democracy, but also that he sought to transform it. Thompson identifies the influence on Strauss of Nietzsche and Schmitt, emphasizes the importance of Machiavelli's politics and Plato's philosophy, shows how Strauss employed fascistic thought in his efforts to transform America, and emphasizes the way Irving Kristol brought Strauss's political philosophy to a new conservative movement (Thompson 2010). Like Thompson, Anne Norton blames Straussians and neoconservatives for pushing America towards a kind of fascism, but she does not see that impulse coming directly out of Strauss's political philosophy (Norton 2005, 58). Nicholas Xenos argues that Norton too readily accepts the claim put forward by Strauss's supporters that his *Natural Right and History* may have inspired a political movement around the notion that America could save western civilization from a decline into nihilism, but that Strauss cannot be blamed for the work of errant pupils (Xenos 2007, 126). Xenos argues that Strauss's writings demonstrate his fascist inclinations. Alan Gilbert agrees with Xenos and emphasizes how Heidegger influenced Strauss's philosophy (Gilbert 2010, "Heidegger's National Socialism and Leo Strauss") and Schmitt influenced his understanding of politics (Gilbert 2010, "Enmity and Tyranny: Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss"). Shadia Drury argues that Strauss's self-proclaimed youthful fascination with Nietzsche and with fascist thought never actually went away; it was infused into his turn to Plato (Drury 1990). Xenos thinks Drury does not go far enough in penetrating Strauss's esoteric writings because in believing that Strauss is essentially promoting the rule of the wise,

she too overemphasizes his *Natural Right and History* (Xenos 2007, 87). According to Xenos, neither Strauss's critics like Drury nor his defenders like the Zuckerts recognize that in his dialogue with Alexander Kojeve, Strauss esoterically reveals that his concept of freedom entailed a political solution to the "crisis of modernity." Xenos argues that Strauss believed liberalism and communism both were converging towards a "universal state," which Strauss claimed was the tyrannical consequence of the principles underlying modern political thought (Xenos 2007, 95). Francis Fukuyama, who was deeply influenced by the Strauss-Kojeve debate, reveals in the less-discussed second part of his much-discussed *End of History* that Nietzschean revolts against universalism will result from aristocratic disgust with the "last man" (Fukuyama 1993). In the name of freedom, aristocratic radicals rise up within liberal societies and revolt against the universal principles they believe propel liberalism, just like communism, towards an egalitarianism they treat as tyrannical. Xenos suggests that for Strauss the Cold War was not only a struggle against communism, but also a struggle against liberalism. To call Strauss a friend of liberal democracy, then, is to employ what Strauss himself called "fanatical obscurantism" (Strauss 1950, 6).

Strauss's work on early modern thought demonstrates his rejection of the principles underlying liberal democracy. His early book on Spinoza offers insight into his critique of reason and democratic politics (Strauss 1930). His work on Hobbes presents alternatively a "humanist" Hobbes who believed man's actions were dictated more by passion than by reason and a "scientific" Hobbes whose authoritarian system was premised on man's evil nature (Strauss 1936, 1953). In both presentations, Strauss locates the beginning of the "crisis of modernity" in Hobbes's belief that natural rights are equal rights and in his movement away from a heroic politics oriented towards glory, duty and sacrifice. Strauss's solution was to do what he believed Schmitt was unable to, which is to "discover a horizon beyond liberalism" (Strauss 1932). Strauss finds this horizon by returning to a pre-modern Machiavelli who Strauss uses to reopen the debate between the ancients and the moderns and to defend hierarchical ways of thinking about freedom. Strauss's supposed return to Plato was an effort to

obscure his actual return to Machiavelli. Machiavelli offered Strauss something that Plato could not. For Strauss, nature is not orderly and harmonious, as it was for Plato, but chaotic and violent. I will argue that Strauss thought superior individuals were those who thrived in nature's flux accomplishing great philosophic and political feats by creating meaning out of nothingness and order out of chaos. Strauss found in Machiavelli a historical consciousness shaped by Christian morality and a program to revive a pagan warrior ethos in a monotheistic world influenced by universal principles of natural law. For Strauss, freedom involves the "natural right" of the strong to rule over the weak, the revival of the right of conquest, the glorification of national power, and the conviction that great meaning emerges out of political battle. I will show that Strauss believed nationalism, or sacred love of one's own political association, can reinvigorate a depoliticized world where human beings have nothing meaningful to believe in or sacrifice for. Freedom is what Strauss offers his elite as they construct those meanings and orders the masses are to sacrifice for.

Like Strauss, Isaiah Berlin believed communism was the enemy of liberal democracy, but their anticommunism was rooted in different attitudes concerning the principles of liberalism. In a critique of Berlin, Strauss claimed that Berlin's defense of liberalism was symptomatic of the "crisis of modernity" because at its core Berlin's pluralism was relativistic (Strauss 1989, 13). Berlin's supporters respond that his pluralism is a defense not only against communism, but also against those domestic critics of liberalism like Irving Kristol who in the name of freedom promote authoritarianism and undermine equality (Walzer 1973). Berlin's defenders embrace not only his pluralistic defense of negative freedom against authoritarianism, but also his critique of Enlightenment universalism and rationalism, which was directed not only against communism but also against strains of liberal thought (see Tamir 1995, George Crowder 2004). His supporters acknowledge that pluralism was indebted to a culturalist orientation, which saw human beings belonging to particular cultural-national groups, and was premised on the belief that human beings are freest, happiest, and most creative when at home in the company of their



own people (Margalit 2010). When his concept of negative liberty is read in the light of his ideas about group identity, it becomes clear that he sought to revise the early modern commitment to individual freedom and to foster a kind of negative freedom that creates space for distinct cultural-national groups to define their own values and satisfy the human need for belonging.

Despite his promotion of cultural particularism, Berlin's supporters emphasize that what made his theory of value pluralism and his concept of freedom truly liberal was his opposition to authoritarianism and absolutism (see Walzer in Lilla et al 2001). Berlin, of course, was a defender of one kind of liberty and a critic of another. He thought that a certain approach to liberty opens the door for authoritarian elites to impose tyrannical rule through ideologies with the proclaimed power to transform human beings (Berlin 1958). When allied with universalist ideals and revolutionary politics, Berlin claimed, this kind of positive liberty leads to absolutism. Berlin's concept of negative freedom preserved the classical liberal opposition to absolutism, but it does so in a manner that departs from the early modern commitment to individual liberty and serves to promote group identity, which pushes liberalism away from universalism and towards nationalism.

What gets lost in the scholarship on Berlin is the extent to which his pluralistic liberalism was designed to counter the Marxian notion of freedom as Berlin understood it. In his mind, Marx infused communism with a concept of freedom that promised more than liberal rights: Marx offered a vision of universal freedom that would enrich all people's lives by liberating the senses through a transformation of social relations (Berlin 1939). Not only did Berlin reject Marxism as absolutist, he rejected the notion that communism or any ideology could be the culmination of a historical process (Berlin 1953). He believed that human freedom involves a kind of willfulness and agency that theories of historical inevitability diminish. For Berlin, Marx's theory of history was especially problematic because it was

premised on a post-national future where a universal class plays the key role in bringing about progress, instead of distinct political or cultural groups (Berlin 1939).

Like Strauss, he turned to Machiavelli to restore his own concept of freedom, but unlike Strauss, Berlin found in Machiavelli resources to construct a liberal theory of pluralism. In Machiavelli, Berlin discovered group-centered negative freedom, a value pluralism wary of universal laws, a political realism opposed to historical inevitability and human perfectibility, and a tragic recognition that human differences lead to perpetual conflict (Berlin 1953). In Berlin's account, Machiavelli's original insights can be used to supplement Enlightenment rationalism and liberal individualism. I will show how through Machiavelli, Berlin argued that liberalism should view nationalism not as a reactionary phenomena, but as modernity's ally in the fight against the authoritarian absolutism, which results from promoting positive liberty, universal principles and revolutionary politics. These problems Berlin traced back to the Enlightenment. His work on counter-Enlightenment thinkers has led to unresolved debates about whether Berlin himself rejected Enlightenment principles (see Lilla et al 2001).

By recovering the Cold War context of his writings, Berlin's critique of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution can be seen in its proper light. In his account, the dangers apparent in communism and in liberal universalism began with Rousseau: his ideas about man's natural innocence, his critique of private property, his alleged belief in progress through revolutionary social change, his embrace of reason as a unifying force, and his faith in human perfectibility through positive freedom (Berlin 2002, 27-49). Berlin saw these ideas filtered through Kant and Hegel and then systematized by Marx. By revising how we think of Kant's liberalism, Berlin hoped to direct modernity away from the Marxist path. This involved reading Kant as a kind of nationalist, which entailed distancing him from the Enlightenment view that man is an individual and autonomous free moral agent capable of self-development through reason and aligning him with those romantic critics of the Enlightenment like Vico

and Herder who claim group membership is an expression of autonomy and agency, which satisfies the human desire for belonging (Berlin 1996, 232-248). In order to defend liberalism against communism in the Cold War, Berlin developed a pluralistic liberal ideology that was influenced by critics of the Enlightenment who challenged both its rationalism and its universalism.

Berlin's pluralism has influenced various liberal scholars who support his commitment to group belonging over universal rights. Ira Katznelson defends Berlin's view that cultural differences are inevitable and meaningful, but downplays the extent to which these differences necessarily lead to political conflict (Katznelson 1996). Yael Tamir, whose dissertation was supervised by Berlin, builds a theory around the way Berlin pushes liberalism away from universalism and towards nationalism (Tamir 1994). Michael Walzer has said that Tamir's book is the best synthesis of Berlin's theory, but Walzer is evasive about the extent of Berlin's rejection of universal principles (Walzer in Lilla et al 2001). Like Tamir, Kymlicka embraces Berlin's view that Herder's nationalism should be treated as an ally of liberalism (Kymlicka 1996). Berlin may have seen Herder's pacifism as naïve, but he stands with Herder in regarding cosmopolitan liberalism as morally shallow and in promoting group belonging over universal rights (Berlin "Two Concepts of Nationalism" in *Letters* 1991).

Berlin's critics point out that his theories are riddled with philosophic and political problems. Ronald Dworkin emphasizes that Berlin's pluralism is relativistic because it is unable to explain why liberty, equality, or democracy are things that should be valued (Dworkin in Lilla et al 2001, 85-86). Carol Gould has argued that Berlin's pluralism is philosophically unsound because it is both relativistic and dogmatic: he treats values as diverse, multiple and of equal worth, but at the same time he makes freedom of choice the dominant value (Gould 2009). Andrew Linklater points to the way Berlin's focus upon the diversity and incommensurability of moral systems gets used to reinforce national ties (Linklater 2007). Perry Anderson argues that Berlin himself saw counter-Enlightenment figures like Vico

and Herder as precursors of Berlin's own cultural pluralism; Anderson sees Berlin as a nationalist and reminds us that Berlin himself declared "My ideas are very English. I've thrown in my lot with England" (Anderson 1990). Eric Hobsbawm claims that Berlin's defense of nationalism and his sympathetic attitude towards counter-Enlightenment thinkers is tied more to his Jewish identity" (Hobsbawm 2004). Zeev Sternhell argues that not only is Berlin's pluralism deeply nationalistic, but also that his critique of reason serves the "anti-enlightenment tradition" and that his negative liberty is a kind of "blocked liberty" that has much in common with Burke's counterrevolutionary thought (Sternhell 2009).

I will show that Berlin and Strauss both sought to counter what Sternhell calls the "Franco-Kantian Enlightenment" by developing theories of freedom as nationalism and that these efforts were fueled by a rejection of Marx and a return to Machiavelli. Only by recovering the Cold War context, can their theories be properly understood. Berlin's biographer readily admits that his "'Two Concepts' was consciously crafted for an era of de-colonization, and its message towards colonial peoples demanding their liberty was highly skeptical" (Ignatieff 2000, 227). Ignatieff makes clear that for Berlin, national liberation movements were "not necessarily fighting for liberty, but for recognition of their distinctiveness." Whereas recognition for being distinctive shapes Berlin's pluralism, Strauss promotes a kind of recognition rooted in superiority, but both believe that universalism cannot satisfy the human desire for recognition. Jurgen Habermas emphasizes that universalism entails a shift from Hobbes to Kant (Habermas 2008). I want to focus on how and why Berlin and Strauss sought to thwart this shift. The "how" focuses on Machiavelli. The "why" on Marx.

### **Statement of the Argument**

This dissertation advances the argument that Leo Strauss and Isaiah Berlin developed distinct ways of thinking about freedom and nationalism as part of an effort to counter the universalist ideas of Marxism during the Cold War. Though Strauss and Berlin understood the threat of Marxist universalism

differently and constructed different theories to oppose it, both cultivated a theory in which freedom and nationalism were conjoined. As they understood it, Marxism was premised on a post-national conception of freedom, whereas they emphasized the political, natural and cultural differences between people, the importance of group power and identity over universal human rights, and the permanent role nations play in human history.

Although their theories of freedom as nationalism were designed to counter the threat of Marxian universalism, their ideas took shape in response to different historical experiences and were motivated by different political visions. The troubles experienced by his family in Russia during the Bolshevik Revolution instilled in Berlin a skepticism towards revolution and universalist thought more generally. His personal history led him to actively oppose communism during the Cold War and to promote instead a liberal ideology based on value pluralism, which could align British and American interests and preserve Anglo-American power. He pursued this goal by constructing a theory of freedom as nationalism in which different groups have the right to define themselves according to their own values, a political theory rooted in the conviction that human freedom is premised on satisfying man's psychological need to belong to a particular cultural-national group.

As a young Jewish German student influenced by proto-fascist thought, Strauss experienced the Nazi turn to anti-Semitism as a betrayal of the principles of fascism. For Strauss, liberalism and communism were sister ideologies, both offspring of a modern political thought grounded in the universal principle of equal human rights and in an understanding of politics aimed at cooperation and mutual understanding. These principles infringed upon a pre-modern notion of freedom that Strauss found compelling. He believed that the pursuit of excellence and the willingness to sacrifice for noble goals were undermined by the ideals of universal equality and perpetual peace, which for Strauss, were forms of tyranny. Freedom meant rejecting these principles and reasserting a philosophy of natural

order through hierarchy and reestablishing a politics of heroic conflict. He saw the Cold War as a way to defeat the universalist principles underlying both communism and liberalism and to restore a vision of politics in which natural elites and great nations exercised their freedom by exerting their “natural right” to rule over inferior individuals and weaker nations. Strauss promoted a conservative revolution with the goal of reestablishing a pre-modern concept of freedom, where a new intellectual aristocracy ruled over a militaristic nation permanently at war with its enemies. In claiming that the nature of political regimes divides the world between friends and enemies, Strauss promoted nationalistic imperialism, rejected modern ideas of universal rights and human equality, elevated the ethic of sacrifice over self-preservation, and resisted institutions devoted to global cooperation through mutual understanding.

Strauss’s aristocratic radicalism will be distinguished from Berlin’s aristocratic pluralism, with its focus on a negative freedom that blends cultural nationalism and political liberalism. Berlin’s aristocratic attitude was shaped by his affiliations with cultural and political elites, not by anything resembling Strauss’s conviction that political and philosophic elites have a natural right to rule over others. Berlin’s defense of liberty emerged out of his opposition to such would be masters. His anticommunism involved a critique of revolutionary politics as authoritarian and universalist ideals as absolutist. Whereas Berlin’s anti-revolutionary, anti-universalist theory opposes radical political change, Strauss sought to co-opt revolutionary and universalist ideas and transform their meaning in a manner that promotes a radical antiliberal program. Despite these differences, I will look at how each thinker countered revolutionary Marxism and subverted universalist ideals by conceiving of freedom in such a way that social and political hierarchies were reinforced and human differences were reified.

To construct their distinctive theories of freedom as nationalism, Strauss and Berlin returned to early modern political thought, especially to those pre-Kantian thinkers whose ideas could be leveraged against revolutionary movements devoted to universal notions of freedom. They both focused on the

early modern era because that was when freedom became a central concern to theorists, particularly to those promoting or resisting revolutionary change. Accepting that in the modern world freedom had a permanent role to play and could serve as a powerful tool, each recognized that cultivating a concept of freedom was politically necessary, especially in a context where a different kind of freedom was mobilizing the world in the name of communism. Berlin hoped that his interpretation of negative freedom and his critique of positive freedom would steer liberalism away from universal principles and revolutionary politics toward a view whereby nationalism was seen not as a reactionary phenomenon but as an ally. Berlin was a defender of liberal democracy, but as Sternhell argues, his critique of positive liberty fostered a “blocked liberalism” and his promotion of value pluralism undermined liberalism’s own universal values (Sternhell 2009). Whereas Berlin was a friend of certain kind of liberty, which served to push liberalism towards nationalism, Strauss was no friend of liberty. Strauss sought to transform liberal democracy entirely by restoring a pre-modern political philosophy that promotes nationalism as a type of civic religion, reinforces social hierarchy, and places philosophic politics atop the natural order of things.

Strauss maintained that Hobbes initiated the problem of modern thought by seeing natural right through the lens of equal rights, by elevating individual rights above political duties derived from natural law, and by envisioning a political framework that rejected ancient notions of glory and sacrifice. Strauss found in Machiavelli the resources he needed to address the “crisis of modernity” that began with Hobbes. Serving as a fulcrum between pre-modern and modern thought, Machiavelli offered Strauss a way to revive the quarrel between ancients and moderns. Reengaging this debate allowed Strauss to combine his own Nietzschean understanding of pre-modern principles with a Schmittean concept of politics. Through Machiavelli, Strauss sought to restore the glory of heroic conflict and national sacrifice, to return to the view that natural order means hierarchy and natural right rule of the strong, and to emphasize the centrality of regime types in the battles between friends and enemies. Strauss believed

new political and philosophical elites were needed to groom and advise authoritarian rulers and to create meaning and purpose for nations at war. Machiavelli offered Strauss something the ancients did not: a concept of freedom that involved new elites emerging through competitive battle to assert their own superiority and impose political and philosophic order on a chaotic world devoid of higher meaning. Strauss's Machiavelli believed that a corrupt society can only be transformed through radical change inspired by a revival of the pagan warrior ethos and that only wise lawgivers employing absolute power can restore virtue. Berlin's reading of early modern thought was inspired by a different vision.

Berlin returned to early modern thought in order to implant there romantic-nationalist ideas from the late 1800s, which could steer modern political thought away from the universalist path Berlin thought it took after the French Revolution under the guidance of Rousseau and Kant. For Berlin, Rousseau initiated the problems in modern thought by emphasizing man's natural innocence, by viewing reason as a unifying social force, by promoting progress through revolutionary social change, by inspiring the idea of human perfectibility, and by fostering a new kind of liberty tied to the general will. Like Strauss, Berlin placed special importance on Machiavelli, but his reading of Machiavelli was decidedly non-Straussian. In Machiavelli, Berlin discovered a pluralistic freedom into which he infused the romantic-nationalist critique of the Enlightenment. Berlin shared what he saw as Machiavelli's philosophical skepticism regarding humanity's ability to understand and control reality. He saw in Machiavelli a pluralism of values, a rejection of monistic principles and natural law, a political realism that rejects human progress and perfectibility, and a recognition that fundamental human differences result in perpetual conflict. If Strauss's Machiavelli betrays the influence of a Nietzschean reading of Schmitt, Berlin's Machiavelli reveals how Berlin was influenced by Meinecke's reading of Herder. In Machiavelli, Berlin finds a type of nationalism in which freedom involves groups pursuing their own political interests and embracing their own cultural values. He praises Machiavelli for accepting that national differences will keep men permanently divided and that overcoming these differences is



foolishly utopian. Even while praising his realism, Berlin finds in Machiavelli a form of political romanticism born of philosophical skepticism in which social ties, communication and creativity are not subject to rational understanding, and he discovers a relativistic pluralism of values in which there is no universal truth from which to judge the cultural values of different groups or on which to build a framework of mutual understanding and shared values.

The Straussian and Berlinian understandings of freedom as nationalism necessarily obstruct post-national approaches to collaborative world politics by elevating the importance of group differences and by seeing conflict as inevitable and meaningful. But behind the overlapping commitment to nationalism against universalism lie deep differences in their thinking about the relationship between freedom and equality, the nexus between politics and culture, and the necessity of revolutionary change. Unlike Habermasian universalism, Berlin's pluralism embraces liberal principles in a manner that perpetuates nationalism and undermines the possibility of achieving mutual understanding among diverse cultures. Straussian exceptionalists reject liberal principles outright, seeing them as symptomatic of the problems of modern political thought. Strauss claimed that Berlin's idea of freedom was characteristic of the "crisis of modernity" and he believed Berlin's liberal pluralism was ungrounded philosophically and too pacific politically. Berlin responded by claiming that an "unbridgeable chasm" separated him from Strauss and that Strauss's idea of freedom threatened the freedom Berlin sought to defend. Despite these differences, however, Marxian universalism represented a common enemy for Berlin and Strauss. Beyond that, they each opposed what Habermas calls the "completion of the modern project" (Habermas 1985, 2008). World order built upon universal principles was seen by both thinkers as either a utopian dream that would end in world war or a dystopian nightmare that would create a new global tyranny. Berlin and Strauss each constructed theories of freedom as nationalism that, however different, serve to prevent universal conceptions of freedom from being realized.

## Research Design and Methodology

My argument depends on a historical methodology for interpreting the ideas of Strauss and Berlin. I will contextualize their respective theories of freedom and nationalism by emphasizing the historical and political circumstances they saw themselves responding to and the threats they saw themselves defending against. The historical methodology I will employ is guided by Quentin Skinner's interpretive approach and seeks to avoid what Skinner accuses Strauss of doing: turning categories of thought into established traditions and imposing those constructs on texts, which then reproduce the insights the interpreter projected onto them (Skinner 1969). A close textual analysis is necessary to unpack the nuanced thought of Strauss and Berlin and to uncover what they personally believed. But because they sometimes obscured their own ideas by speaking through the mouths of other thinkers and by using familiar concepts in entirely novel ways, it is essential to supplement textual analysis with contextual elements. Not only will I compare how Strauss and Berlin developed their own categories and concepts throughout all their written works, I will situate their ideas in the personal and political circumstances that shaped their life and thought.

Personal and political history influences theory. My methodological focus will show how personal backgrounds and political circumstances shaped what Strauss and Berlin saw themselves doing and how they did it. Interpreting Strauss's political philosophy requires going beyond the text and looking at the intellectual milieu of Weimar Germany and its response to the rise of Nazism. I will look at the way Heidegger's dispute with Strauss's thesis advisor Ernst Cassirer influenced Strauss's critique of the enlightenment and modernity. Strauss's personal correspondence with Heidegger admirers Jacob Klein and Karl Löwith highlight Strauss's self-proclaimed support for "the principles of the Right: authoritarianism, imperialism and fascism" (Strauss 1933). But even as he offered a right-wing criticism of the Nazis, Strauss experienced the Nazi exclusion of Jews as a betrayal of the principles of fascism. I

will explore how that betrayal influenced his understanding of nationalism as a civic-religious force rather than a racial or ethnic one. In his personal letters to Carl Schmitt, Strauss reveals his affinity with Schmitt's conception of politics and his critique of liberalism. Strauss's claim that Schmitt "remained within the horizon of liberalism" sheds light on Strauss's own critique of liberalism (Strauss 1933). To understand how and why Strauss altered this critique, I will compare Strauss's writings before and after his 1937 move to the US, where he developed an esoteric style of writing, and investigate whether and how World War II led Strauss to substantively alter his critique. To understand Strauss's postwar writings, I will recover the Cold War context in which he developed his political philosophy. Strauss's correspondence with Alexander Kojeve offers insight into Strauss's view that liberalism and communism both emerge out of the same problematic modern principles, that both ideologies are converging and moving towards a "universal state," and that defending freedom entails resisting universalism and transforming liberalism (Strauss 1961).

Berlin's theories were shaped by his experience in post-revolutionary Russia and by his work in the 1940's for the British government. As the child of a wealthy Jewish family in St. Petersburg, Berlin experienced the Russian Revolution and communist rule as authoritarian and absolutist, which influenced his early critical work on Marx, a figure who would serve as a "lifelong target" for Berlin's attacks on communism (Ignatieff 2000, 93). After moving to England, he gave voice to a kind of freedom he felt worthy of defense. But Berlin's anticommunism was also an expression of his allegiance to a group of persecuted Russian cultural elites of whom the communists spared only those like Anna Akhmatova and Boris Pasternak because their nationalist sympathies could be exploited for political purposes (Ignatieff 2000, 233). In the early 1940s, Berlin worked for the British Information Services in New York seeking to align US with British policy. In the words of his biographer, Berlin's "job was to get America into the war" (Ignatieff 2000, 101). Throughout World War II, he worked for the British embassy in Washington, DC, and immediately after the war he served in Moscow, just as the Cold War was taking

shape. But his understanding of nationalism was also tied to what Eric Hobsbawm calls Berlin's "nonnegotiable Jewish identity," which led him to support the founding of a Jewish state and to "defend or at least try to understand the critics of the Enlightenment" (Hobsbawm 2004). I will investigate how Berlin's Jewish identity and his friendship with figures like Chaim Weizmann influenced the nature of his Zionism, his defense of nationalism and his concept of freedom.

Strauss and Berlin were both political theorists who turned to the history of ideas to promote their own solutions to political and philosophic questions, but their method of doing intellectual history allowed them to hide their own ideas by speaking through the mouths of previous thinkers. My approach will be to analyze what Strauss and Berlin claim a thinker meant by not only comparing those claims to what those thinkers actually wrote, but also by highlighting what these claims say about the underlying intentions and interests Strauss and Berlin saw themselves pursuing and how their interpretations of political thought serve those ends.

### **Provisional Chapter Outline**

#### 1. Introduction

This chapter will focus on the historical and political context that influenced the ideas of Berlin and Strauss. It will show how the political struggles of pre-WWII Europe shaped their ideological commitments and set the stage for a Cold War battle between Western democracy and Soviet communism. The emphasis will be on the way anticommunism became central to democratic thought and the way Strauss and Berlin developed conservative and liberal theories to counter the revolutionary threat of Marxism.

#### 2. Berlin's Political Theory – Freedom as Pluralism

This chapter will show how Isaiah Berlin developed a Liberal form of anticommunism. It will look into how his personal history in post-Revolutionary Russia and his work in the 1940s for the British government influenced his anticommunism. The chapter will emphasize how ideas about nationalism shaped his concept of freedom and his theory of value pluralism and explore the tensions that exist between his defense of negative liberty and his promotion of pluralism.

### 3. Reconstructing Liberalism – Berlin’s Revision of Early Modern Thought

This chapter will focus on how Berlin interpreted early modern thought in a manner that sought to reconcile negative liberty and value pluralism. The emphasis will be on how his anticommunism influenced his critique of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. This chapter will highlight how his struggle against Marxism led him to Herder and how romantic thinkers shaped his critique of Rousseau’s freedom, his discovery of Kant’s nationalism, his different readings of Montesquieu’s relativism, and his reconstruction of Machiavelli.

### 4. Strauss’s Political Philosophy – Freedom as Exceptionalism

This chapter will look at how Strauss’s theory was shaped by his critique of modernity. It will show how his experience in Weimar Germany influenced his critique of both communism and liberalism and how WWII and his immigration to the US led him to revise this critique. The chapter will demonstrate how the Cold War provided the context for Strauss to imagine a new role for the US as savior of Western civilization based on an exceptionalist theory of freedom tied to a civic-religious theory of nationalism.

### 5. Reconstructing Conservatism – Strauss’s Revision of Early Modern Thought

This chapter will emphasize how Strauss’s anticommunism and antiliberalism are evident in his reading of early modern thought. It will show how his shift from a “humanist” to a “scientific” Hobbes involved a change in Strauss’s writing style, but did not change his belief that Hobbes initiated the “crisis of modernity.” The chapter will argue that Strauss’s philosophic return to Machiavelli and his political struggle against Marx were part of an effort to solve the modern crisis. It will show how Strauss’s readings of early modern thought were influenced by Schmitt, Nietzsche, and Heidegger and how Strauss’s Platonic idealism is really a form of Machiavellian realism.

### 6. Conclusion – Beyond the Cold War

The concluding chapter will look at the influence their theories have had on post-Cold War liberal and conservative thought. It will discuss how Berlin’s pluralism influenced liberal forms of nationalism, multiculturalism, and communitarianism and how Strauss nurtured a new kind of conservative radicalism. The chapter will look at how these liberal and conservative currents influenced post-9/11 U.S. policy and explore how they continue to undermine universalist ideals.

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