

“The *Topos* of the Crisis of the West in Postwar German Thought”

Marie-Josée Lavallée, Ph.D.

Department of History, Université de Montréal, Canada

Department of Political Science, Université du Québec à Montréal, Canada

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In this paper, I intend to explore some narratives on the West by adopting an historical-philosophical perspective. I will focus on the notion of the “crisis of the West” which pervades German thought at the time of the two world wars. I will analyze and compare the “diagnoses” of this crisis put forward by three German political thinkers who emigrated in the United States in the 1930s because of Nazism, Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin and Hannah Arendt.

Like many of their contemporaries Strauss, Voegelin, and Arendt envision the unprecedented savagery and horror of twentieth century’s wars and Nazism as the outcome of deficiencies which occurred in the course of Western civilization's development. They put on trial “modernity”, which encompasses features like science, “rationalism”, capitalism, industrialisation, mass culture, individualism and liberalism. Even if those developments have contributed to Western civilization’s material advancement and improvement, Strauss, Arendt and Voegelin instead underline their corrosive effects on morality, philosophy, spirituality, and politics. Despite the fact that they are very different thinkers – Arendt’s political thought departs radically from that of his colleagues - they entertain a set of similar ideas which they inherited from their formative years in Germany and Austria and from the German intellectual context of the 1920s and 1930s.

To Strauss, the crisis of the West is connected to the denial of the existence of a universal morality. To Voegelin, the crisis has its roots in the severing of the relationship of societies and individuals to the divine. The core of the crisis, in Arendt’s opinion, is the forgetting of the authentic meaning of political action. However, Strauss, Voegelin and Arendt have not entrenched themselves into a passive pessimism. Searching for ways to overcome the crisis, they all turned to the Classical tradition and ancient thought, and sometimes to the biblical tradition, to shed light on the politics and moral issues arose by Nazism. To them, the crisis is closely connected to the forgetting of classical intellectual traditions. In the first place, I will present the main lines along which these thinkers conceptualize the Western tradition and modernity. Then, I will analyze their respective narratives on these topics, and expose which solutions they propose to overcome the crisis.

1 – The Western Tradition and Modernity

The tradition of Western philosophy is highly important in Strauss, Voegelin and Arendt’s reflection. To them, the Western tradition first describes a sequence of philosophical and political thought extending throughout the centuries from the Ancient Greeks to Nazism, which has brought about its collapse. Even if the tradition has suffered a lot, it has not entirely disappeared. However, a work of remembrance and

reinterpretation was much needed, especially since the crisis has not been exhausted by totalitarianism¹ in Strauss, Voegelin and Arendt's opinion.

The starting point of the Western tradition on the philosophical level is Plato. Strauss and Voegelin, who pay close attention to the religious component of Western thought, also underline the role of the Bible, or of “Jerusalem” (as Strauss names it) in the Western tradition². In addition, Strauss had a great interest in Jewish and Muslim medieval thought, which give a “direct” access to ancient Greek thought in his opinion, in particular, to Plato. Besides this specific philosophical conceptualization, Strauss, Voegelin and Arendt refer to the “Western tradition” as a broader empirical concept, which applies to the time span between Greek Antiquity and our own time and which covers spatially Europe and America.

“Modernity” is a specific phenomenon inside the Western tradition. From political philosophy’s viewpoint, Strauss, Voegelin and Arendt agree that Hobbes’ political thought is the starting point of modernity³. They connect Descartes more specifically to the rise of scientific thought and modern science. If the latter opens a new era in human history, from the 16th-17th centuries onwards⁴, modern science also induced a radical break in the sequence of Western tradition, since modernity was a “reaction” against tradition. The 16th century is also the starting point of the imperial “expansion of Western civilization”, points out Voegelin⁵. In Strauss, Arendt and Voegelin’s accounts of the Western tradition and its crisis, modernity plays a crucial role. Either it has brought about the decline of Western civilization either it acts like an accelerator within a process which has started a few centuries before⁶.

2 – The Crisis of the West

Leo Strauss

“The contemporary crisis of Western civilization may be said to be identical with the climatic crisis of the idea of progress in the full and emphatic sense of the term”, states Leo Strauss in “Progress or Return ? The Contemporary Crisis in Western

¹ Strauss, L., 1959. “What is Political Philosophy ?”, in Strauss, L., *An Introduction to Political Philosophy. Ten Essays*, Gildin, H., ed., Detroit, Wayne State University Press, p.3 ; Strauss, L., 1952. “Progress or Return ? The Contemporary Crisis in Western Civilization”, in Strauss, L., *An Introduction to Political Philosophy. Ten Essays*, Gildin, H., ed., Detroit, Wayne State University Press, p.264-265 ; 267-268 ; 272 ; Voegelin, E., 1952. *The New Science of Politics. An Introduction*, Chicago – Londres, University of Chicago Press, p.164-165 ; 189.

² Strauss, L., 1952. “Progress or Return ?”, p.265 sq. ; see also Strauss, L., 1967. “Athens and Jerusalem. Some Preliminary Reflections”, in *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, Chicago - Londres, The University of Chicago Press (1983), p.147-173.

³ Arendt, H., 1954-1963. «The Concept of History. Ancient and Modern», in *Between Past and Future. Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, New York, Penguin Books (2006), p.54-56 ; Voegelin, E., 1952, p.179-184.

⁴ Arendt, H., 1954-1963. «Tradition and the Modern Age», in *Between Past and Future. Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, New York, Penguin Books (2006), p.27 ; 31 ; Arendt, H., “The Concept of History”, p.53 ; 61.

⁵ Voegelin, E., 1956. *Order and History I. Israel and Revelation*, Columbia, University of Missouri Press (2001), p.173.

⁶ See Arendt, H., “Tradition and the Modern Age”, p.39-40.

Civilization”⁷. Not only “progress” is one major aspect of “modernity”, but Strauss holds that “progress” is one of the main responsible of the crisis of the West as a whole, since it has undermined (along with other features of modernity) the foundations of morality⁸. This destruction proved fatal to politics. In face of this situation, Strauss advocates, on the one hand, the retrieval of the roots of Western civilization, Greek philosophy and the Bible. On the other hand, he believes that a deep renewal of political philosophy on the basis of ancient Greek thought would also contribute to overcome the crisis of the West.

Eric Voegelin

Eric Voegelin, since *Die Politischen Religionen* (1938), claims that Gnosticism is the main disease which caused the crisis of the West. The origins of Gnosticism, according to Voegelin, are to be found in St. Paul and St. John⁹. However, he gives a very broad meaning to this concept, applying it to a vast array of philosophical, sociological and political tendencies (or actors) throughout the centuries¹⁰, including science, “history”, and of course, Nazism¹¹. In Voegelin's writings, Gnosticism and ideology are often synonyms. So, the origins of the disease which afflicts Western civilization are to be found in Antiquity¹², but Voegelin holds that “the essence of modernity [... is] the growth of Gnosticism”¹³. He adds that “the corrosion of Western civilization through Gnosticism is a slow process extending over a thousand years”¹⁴. Because the latter has brought about the severing of the relationship between man and his society and the divine, the way to counter the crisis is, in the first place, to re-establish these ties. In the second place, one should establish order in society, but this depends on man's capacity to establish order in his soul. Plato can show us the way since his dialogues man is connected to the divine, and the order of the soul presents itself as the paradigm for the order of society¹⁵.

Hannah Arendt

The crisis of the West in Arendt's writings has two “founding moments”. The first one, which goes back to Antiquity, is proper to political thought, it occurred in Plato's dialogues. Arendt describes Plato as the originator of a deep contempt for politics which

⁷ Strauss, L., “Progress or Return ?”, p.263 ; see p.264.

⁸ On this topic, see also Strauss, L., 1975. “Three Waves of Modernity“, in *An Introduction to Political Philosophy. Ten Essays*, Giddin, H., éd., Detroit, Wayne State University Press (1989), p.81 ; Strauss, L., 1953. *Natural Right and History*, Chicago – Londres, University of Chicago Press, p.2-4 ; 6 ; 9 ; 94-95.

⁹ Voegelin, E., 1952, p.126 ; 108.

¹⁰ Voegelin, E., 1952, p.127.

¹¹ Voegelin, E., 1952, p.126-127.

¹² Voegelin, E., 1952, p.107-109.

¹³ Voegelin, E., 1952, p.126. See p.107-132.

¹⁴ Voegelin, E., 1952, p.188.

¹⁵ Voegelin, E., 1956-1957. *Order and History. Volume 3. Plato and Aristotle, s.l.*, Louisiana State University Press, p.5 ; 39 ; 43 ; 70 ; 72-78 ; Voegelin, E., *Israel and Revelation*, p.43 ; 378.

the whole tradition has been assimilating¹⁶. She holds that this pattern of thought is responsible for the decline of free and norm-free political action and political freedom. Moreover, Plato has imposed the view that politics and ethics should stick to normative standards and criteria, another position which, in Arendt's opinion, proved corrosive to politics. However, "modernity" has brought about a crisis of its own¹⁷, which is connected to modern political thought. While the latter proclaims to refute ancient thought, in fact, it has only prorogated and refined Plato's prejudices against politics. Arendt agrees with Strauss on the risks to which modern thought, science and technology expose politics and ethics¹⁸, and on the destructive effects of positivism and history. If Arendt does advocate a return to Classical thought, she believes that one must turn to Homer, Thucydides and Aristotle¹⁹ in order to discover inspiring examples for political action, rather than Plato. She nevertheless has found beneficial ethical reflections in Plato's dialogues.

Conclusion

The "West", in philosophic-historical perspective, can describe a sequence in the history of thought, that is, a "tradition", which runs from the Ancient Greeks to us. The three thinkers I have considered all believe that some developments which occurred during this long sequence have caused a severing of the link with Greek and ancient origins. This loss of our civilizations' roots would be, directly or indirectly, responsible for the moral, philosophical and political decline of Western civilization. So they propose to inverse this still ongoing process by retrieving those roots. Strauss, Voegelin and Arendt know very well that one cannot make Antiquity "live again" in the world of their time, whose moral and physical survival has been put to test in the first place by Nazism, then, by the prospect of a nuclear attack, which is the most extreme expression of the dangers of technology. However, they are all convinced that the Ancients have a lot to teach us, in order to inspire a sound renewal of the foundations of politics and morality.

¹⁶ Arendt, H., 1954-1963. «What is Authority ?», in *Between Past and Future. Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, New York, Penguin Books (2006), p.114 ; Arendt, H., 1958. *The Human Condition*, Chicago – Londres, University of Chicago Press (1998), p.17-18.

¹⁷ See, for example, Arendt, H., "The Concept of History", p.61.

¹⁸ Strauss, L., "Progress or Return ?", p.261-262. ; Arendt, H., "The Concept of History", p.61-62 ; Arendt, H., "Tradition and the Modern Age", p.27 ; 31.

¹⁹ Arendt, H., *The Human Condition*, p.25-27 ; 196 ; 198 ; 200 ; 204-205 ; Arendt, H., 1954. "Philosophy and Politics", in *Social Research*, 57, 1, p.83-84 ; Arendt, H., "Tradition and the Modern Age", p.22-23.

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