
EDUCACIÓN LIBERAL Y DEMOCRACIA EN EL PENSAMIENTO DE LEO STRAUSS

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El presente artículo busca investigar la *dimensión educativa* del pensamiento de Leo Strauss. Para estos efectos, primero se abordará su pensamiento sobre educación, luego se tratará sobre el modo como Strauss formula sus ideas filosóficas y teológicas, y finalmente, se hará referencia al rol de esta educación en las democracias modernas.

Palabras clave: Leo Strauss, educación, tradición anglo-sajona, democracia.

LIBERAL EDUCATION AND DEMOCRACY IN LEO STRAUSS'S THOUGHT

The present article intends to investigate the educational dimension of Leo Strauss's thought. To this end, it will firstly attend to his thoughts on education, secondly to the way how Strauss formulates his philosophical and theological ideas, and finally to the role of this education in modern democracies.

Keywords: Leo Strauss, education, Anglo-Saxon tradition, democracy.

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Introduction

THIS WORK IS AN ATTEMPT TO INVESTIGATE THE *EDUCATIVE DIMENSION* of Leo Strauss's thought. Pursuant to such an objective, the research scope has been confined to the following: first, understanding and explaining the author's thoughts on education, second, the dimensions and the way this philosophical and theological thought is formulated, and third, the role of such education in modern democracies.

Leo Strauss's political philosophy consists in the recovery and current rehabilitation of the philosophic and political thought of the ancient world. The author found his mission to be the reestablishment of political philosophy, and in some way he opened up a discussion with the challenge of revelation¹. It is precisely here that the question of education within Straussian thought comes into place, as this work will try to show.

Leo Strauss, as other philosophers, has a few writings on education². Nevertheless, it is worth pointing out that his ideas have aroused in the last years several research projects on the role of education in the construction of the political body in modern democracies³.

1. Liberal Education in the Anglo-Saxon tradition

Talking about education as it appears in Leo Strauss's thought implies talking about the notion of *liberal education* as a characteristic cultural and educative phenomenon of the Anglo-Saxon world. This means that in the Anglo-Saxon culture, there is a working

¹ MEIER, H., *Leo Strauss y el problema teológico-político*, Katz, Buenos Aires, 2006, p. 9.

² YORK, J. G., «Neoconservatism and Leo Strauss: the place of a liberal education», *Critical Studies in Education* 49, 1, 2008, pp. 67-80, p. 68.

³ FULLER, T., «The Idea of the University in Newman, Oakeshott, and Strauss», *Academic Questions*, 2003-2004, pp. 37-53; MELZER, A. M., «On the Pedagogical Motive for Esoteric Writing», *The Journal of Politics* 69, 4, 2007, pp. 1015-1031; McDONOUGH, T., «Strauss's rights pedagogy», *Critical Studies in Education* 49, 1, 2008, pp. 81-98; PETERS, M. A., «Leo Strauss and the Neoconservative Critique of the Liberal University: Postmodernism, Relativism and the Culture Wars», *Critical Studies in Education*, 49, 1, 2008, pp. 11-32; FENNELL, J. M. AND SIMPSON, T. L., «Leo Strauss: Education and the Body Politic», *Critical Studies in Education*, 49, 1, 2008, pp. 49-65; YORK, J. G., *op. cit.*, among others.

and living presence of an educative tradition that dates back to the teaching of liberal arts and that has uninterruptedly configured a particular and characteristic type of educative conception of man.

In this sense, John Stuart Mill when taking possession of his position as Rector of the University of St. Andrews in 1867 stated that «universities should not be places of professional education, because the object is not to make skilful lawyers, or physicians, or engineers, but capable and cultivated human beings»⁴. J.S. Mill is a representative of this tradition which prefers a *liberal education*, like the one that Copleston referred to in 1810 in his defense of the *status quo* of Oxford University.

Such liberal education, as an educative path – *Bildung* – of the human being, has also an important precursor in the figure of Cardinal J.H. Newman. He thought the education of the *gentleman* to be based on the classic Greco-Roman and Christian thought and the humanist tradition of Oxford University⁵. But also many others reflected on such educative ideals, which aroused different and varied versions at the same time.

In that way, Ralph White states that there have been disagreements in the consideration of the degree to which a *liberal ideal* could or needed to be justified by reference to some external aim⁶. Nevertheless, whichever these differences are, everyone maintains the priority that is given to the development of reason and to those studies that promote the capacity of knowing, understanding and searching for the truth⁷.

Such educative ideas also influenced the English colonies and, therefore, the United States. They were strongly valid up to the mid-XXth century, moment since which liberal studies have influenced the northern country in different ways – among which is outstanding the German model of Research University – and American Universities in general have adopted them.

Later, every element of the syllabus of the *liberal studies* was systematically questioned, especially by utilitarian arguments⁸. Nevertheless, these liberal studies are still alive and valid, as many and varied Universities and Colleges of the United States testify⁹.

⁴ MILL, J. S., *Inaugural Lecture at the University of St. Andrews*, in CAVENAGH, F.A. (ED.), *James and John Stuart Mill on Education*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1931.

⁵ NEWMAN, J. H., *University Sketches*, St. Paul Publications, New York, 1964; NEWMAN, J. H., *The Idea of a University*, Yale University Press, New Haven CT, 1996; CORCORAN, T., *Newman's Theory of liberal Education*, University College, Dublin, 1930.

⁶ WHITE, R., «The Anatomy of a Victorian Debate», in *British Journal of Educational Studies*, vol. 34, 1, 1986, pp. 38-65.

⁷ PRING, R., «The aims of education: liberal or vocational?», in *Philosophy of Education*, Continuum, London-New York, 2004, pp. 42-60.

⁸ LIND, M., «Why the Liberal Arts Still Matter», *The Wilson Quarterly*, 30, 4, 2006, pp. 52-58, p. 55.

⁹ Examples: St. John's College in Annapolis, California, and Santa Fe, New Mexico; Thomas Aquinas College in Santa Paula, California; Rose Hill College in Aiken, South Carolina; among many others.

2. Education in Leo Strauss's thought

It has to be stated that Leo Strauss approaches the problem of human education respectfully and conscious of its incalculable worth. It is particularly shown in a passage of his work that also helps us to locate the dimension of education which arouses his particular interest.

I own that – education – is in a sense the subject matter of my teaching and my research. But I am almost solely concerned with the goal or end of education at its highest – with the education of the perfect prince, as it were – and very little with its conditions and its how¹⁰.

Leo Strauss reflects, on the one hand, specifically on the education of the *leader* or, in the current political context, on the education of the *ruling classes* in modern democracy, and on the other hand, his thought deals with the end of education, i.e. on the effect that it must tend to reach in the human being.

As regards this, the author refers to education in two different but complementary works. The first, titled «What is Liberal education?», was a speech pronounced by L. Strauss in June 1959, in the tenth annual graduation exercise of the *Basic Program for Liberal Education for Adult at the University College*, University of Chicago, and published by the same University. This work was later reprinted for the first time by C. Scott Fletcher in a joint work titled *Education for social responsibility*, New York, 1961 and recently reprinted for the second time by the magazine *Academic Questions*, in the years 2003-2004.

The second work, titled «Liberal Education and Responsibility» was a *lectio* entrusted to the author by the *American Foundation for Continuing Education* in 1962, and it was published the same year in *Education: The Challenge Ahead*, by C. Scott Fletcher (ed.), in a second volume of *Education for Social Responsibility*, New York.

In his first article Leo Strauss presents, in general terms, what *liberal education* should be and its value in relation to *modern democracy*. In a first approach the author points out that:

Liberal education is education in culture or toward culture. The finished product of a liberal education is a cultured human being. 'Culture' (cultura) means primarily agriculture: the cultivation of the soil and its products, taking care of the soil, improving the soil in accordance with its nature. 'Culture' means derivatively and today chiefly the cultivation of the mind, the taking care and improving of the native faculties of the mind in accordance with the nature of the mind. Just as the soil needs cultivators of the soil, the mind needs teachers. But teachers are not as easy to come by as farmers¹¹.

¹⁰ STRAUSS, L., «Liberal Education and Responsibility», in FLETCHER, C.S. (ED.), *Education: the Challenge Ahead*, Norton & Company, New York, 1962, pp. 49-70, p. 49.

¹¹ STRAUSS, L., «What is Liberal Education?», *Academic Questions*, Winter 2003-2004, pp. 31-36, p. 31.

Leo Strauss uses the analogy between the care that the land needs and the care that the *cultivation* of a person needs. As the earth needs the proper care for its characteristics – such as time, farming, nutrients, etc – in order for its products to be obtained, man needs education. Culture is in this sense the most adequate mean for the education and development of an *educated human being*. The question that arises immediately is: How to obtain culture? In this matter Leo Strauss points out two basic possibilities: one, *teachers*, and two, the *great books* left to humanity by the greatest minds.

[...] *Liberal education will then consist in studying with the proper care the great books which the greatest minds have left behind*¹².

It is necessary to clarify some aspects, as regards *liberal education* and *the methods to have access to culture* by reading great books. First, it needs to be stated that liberal education is not an *indoctrination* of the person, i.e. it is not education in the ideology or for the ideology. On the contrary, liberal education is the kind of education that is obtained from the world of letters, and particularly from classic Greek and Latin letters.

But what does «studying with the proper care the great books» mean? What hermeneutic tools do the disciples or students have in order to interpret the thoughts of great minds? Strauss's response: «we must read great texts in their own contexts..., instead of inserting them in a product of our knowledge»¹³, as he wrote to H. Gadamer in 1961. In this sense, Strauss puts forward a return to the study of the great works left by the great masters of the Western World, and with it the recovery of the genuine points of view of their authors, just as they expressed themselves, that is to say, *contributing with all untimely assumptions*.

It was formerly stated that *liberal education* is the path that makes a cultivated human being, i.e. a *gentleman* or a *lord*, which Strauss expresses in the following way:

*One becomes a gentleman by education, by liberal education. [...] in fact, the gentlemen are 'the earnest ones'. They are earnest because they are concerned with the most weighty matters, with the only things which deserve to be taken seriously for their own sake, with the good order of the soul and of the city. The education of the potential gentlemen is the playful anticipation of the life of gentlemen. It consists above all in the development of character and taste. The fountains of that education are the poets. It is hardly necessary to say that the gentlemen are in need of skills*¹⁴.

Upon these considerations the following question arises: Can education as it is being handled nowadays develop the lords conceived by L. Strauss? And the answer is honestly no. The reason is that modern education has actually frustrated the two crucial ways sta-

¹² *Idem.*

¹³ PIERPAULI, J. R., *Leo Strauss y la filosofía política*, Lancelot, Buenos Aires, 2007, pp. 7-8.

¹⁴ STRAUSS, L., «Liberal Education...», *op. cit.*, p. 52.

ted by Strauss to have access to *liberal education*, and in consequence to a real human *Bildung*, since today's educative thought has caused the systematic disavowal not only of the teachers' figure but also of cultivated knowledge, i.e.: culture in its highest expression, systematically substituting it. In a deeper study of this phenomenon, mention cannot be avoided of the fact that education in modern democracy is another tool in the hands of «politics» and, unfortunately much worse, another tool in the hands of politicians, consequently restricted to their beliefs, timetables and personal interests¹⁵.

Modern philosophy, which inspires modern education, is mainly an immanent thought, and a thought in the service of immanent ends; consequently, useful for humans' earthly life. So, for modern thought, any kind of knowledge has to find grounds in and for society and not in oneself as it was for ancient thought. The stress of this earthly perspective of education is what leads, in some way, to an almost exclusive concern with *current affairs*. Every historical perspective, every tradition fades away in the here and now, in which the novelty of life for surviving receives a new meaning, i.e.: education to acquire working skills, that is, strong and pure *employability*.

In modern democracy, where equalitarianism rules, an education specifically oriented to the ruling classes of a community is not set up. Besides, the type of education put forward is not aimed at *humanistic education* but, in the best of cases, it has specific working aims.

3. Liberal Education and Democracy

Democracy, as regards a political regime, is one of the ways of regulating the human community considered in the course of history. Politologists and political philosophy experts agree that democracy, ideally, is everybody's government, but the facts show it to be the government of a minority that at a suitable moment rises to power.

Modern democracy, so far from being universal aristocracy, would be mass rule were it not for the fact that the mass can not rule, but is ruled by elites, that is, groupings of men who for whatever reason are on top or have a fair chance to arrive at the top; one of the most important virtues required for the smooth working of democracy, as far as the mass is concerned, is said to be electoral apathy, viz., lack of public spirit; not indeed the salt of the earth, but the salt of modern democracy are those citizens who read nothing except the sports page and the comic section. Democracy is then not indeed mass rule, but mass culture. A mass culture is a culture which can be appropriated by the meanest capacities without any intellectual and moral effort whatsoever and at a very low monetary price¹⁶.

¹⁵ Cfr. *ibidem*, pp. 62-63.

¹⁶ STRAUSS, L., «What is...», *op. cit.*, p. 33.

The studies done by L. Strauss on the origin of modern republicanism led him to distinguish clearly the differences between modern doctrines and its classic origins. Modern doctrine starts from the natural equality of men, and therefore it leads to the affirmation that sovereignty belongs to the people; however, it infers that such sovereignty guarantees natural rights for every person. It reaches this result through the distinction between the sovereign and the government, and through the demand of basic government division of powers. The fully developed doctrine required a man who voted, a secret vote and voting rights not to be restricted because of poverty, religion or race. On the other hand, government acts should be as open to public inspection as possible, since the government is nothing but the people's representative. Here is where a crucial question arises which is the nucleus of modern republicanism: who do the people respond for their elections?

In the light of the original conception of modern republicanism, our present predicament appears to be caused by the decay of religious education of the people and by the decay of liberal education of the representatives of the people [...]. The question as to whether religious education can be restored to its pristine power by the means at our disposal is beyond the scope of this lecture. [...] our present expectation from such liberal education not due to the void created by the decay of religious education? Is such liberal education meant to perform the function formerly performed by religious education? Can liberal education perform that function?¹⁷

Also, it needs to be added that this situation was historically worsened by the emergence of totalitarian ideologies, which Strauss suffered. The result of such a process has culminated in the current relativism and nihilism that the author clearly refers to¹⁸. In this context L. Strauss's ideas develop the study of the role of liberal education in modern democracy through a historic and philosophical journey that includes Plato's *Republic*, J. Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, A. Hamilton's *Federalist Papers* and the introductory speech at St. Andrews by John Stuart Mill, for whom liberal education is «... the education of all who are not obliged by their circumstances to discontinue their scholastic studies at a very early age»¹⁹.

Mill's speech has a series of really interesting remarks on *liberal education*. The author grants this kind of education the «superiority» of classic literature «for purposes of education» to the fact that it transmits to us «the wisdom of life»: «In cultivating [...] ancient languages as our best literary education, we are all the while laying an admirable foundation for ethical and philosophical culture». Even more admirable than «the substance» is «the form» of treatment. «It must be remembered that old writers had more time and they wrote mainly for a select class possessed of leisure» whereas we «write in a hurry for people who

¹⁷ Cfr. STRAUSS, L., «Liberal Education...», *op. cit.*, pp. 57-58 and p. 62.

¹⁸ Cfr. *ibidem*, pp. 67-68.

¹⁹ Quoted in *ibidem*, p. 60.

read in a hurry». That is, the classics used «the right words in the right place» or which means the same thing, they were not «prolix»²⁰.

*Following Mill's suggestion, we would have to consider whether and to what extent the education of the future civil servants can and should be improved, or in other words whether the present form of their education is liberal education in a tolerably strict sense*²¹.

Leo Strauss holds that through liberal education, worthy of this name, of the ruling class of a country it can be assured in some way and under certain conditions that its governors are more or less educated and virtuous. Elaborating on J.S. Mill's point that liberal education would in fact have little effect over the «miscellaneous assembly»²², Strauss states that:

*the natural tendency of the representative government, as the one of modern civilization, naturally inclines to collective mediocrity; [...] giving power to every time more inferior people at the highest level of instruction of the community. [...] It is an acknowledged fact that in American democracy [...] the most eminent people in the community, except for those who are willing to sacrifice their opinions and ways of thinking and they become the servile spokesperson of their intellectually inferiors, they never offer themselves to the government offices of countries; so true is it, that they do not have a chance of being elected*²³.

Through an educated ruling class a mere mass democracy can be improved into a democracy in which an aristocracy that pervades tonality to society, and that rules for general welfare. But the exact meaning of «aristocracy» in this context must be considered here. It is not necessary to clarify that by «aristocracy» it is not meant wealthy people, or descendants of renowned families; it is more than that. The superiority of the *gentleman* and the *lord* stems from the quality of education, as L. Strauss states²⁴.

The liberal education to which L. Strauss refers to is a type of education put forward not only as an element to avoid *mass rebellion*, but also for society to rise from a mass democracy.

²⁰ MILL, J. S., *op. cit.*, pp. 151-157.

²¹ STRAUSS, L., «Liberal Education...», *op. cit.*, p. 62.

²² MILL, J. S., *Considerations on representative government*, Dutton, New York, 1971, pp. 93-155.

²³ STRAUSS, L., «Liberal Education...», *op. cit.*, p. 58

²⁴ Cfr. STRAUSS, L., «Liberal Education...», *op. cit.*, p. 52.

Conclusion

These statements try to expose two elements that can help us understand better not only the idea of education in Straussian thought but also the practical attitude taken by L. Strauss in a moment of his life. As regards the first assumption, it may be introduced through the following questions: What is the perspective for *liberal education* within mass democracy? What are the perspectives of becoming a new power in democracy that those who are liberally educated have? To which L. Strauss answers:

We are not permitted to remain silent on the dangers to which democracy exposes itself as well as human excellence; we cannot forget the obvious fact that by giving freedom to all, democracy also gives freedom to those who care for human excellence. No one prevents us from cultivating our garden or from setting up outposts which may come to be regarded by many citizens as salutary to the republic and as deserving of giving to it its tone. [...] we can expect more immediate help from the humanities rightly understood than from the sciences. [...] this is the reason why liberal education is now becoming almost synonymous with the reading in common of the Great Books²⁵.

The second assumption, derived from the first, is pointed out by H. Meier and it concerns the foundation of a philosophical school that played an important role in the reception of Strauss's philosophy. Strauss's important political project only became the foundation of a school when the offer of a professorship in Political Philosophy of the University of Chicago in 1949 gave him the chance. The foundation of a school helps to create an audience for a new orientation of philosophy and to give it continuity. When the objective is to found a tradition and to increase the possibility of certain works to continue to be accessible for future generations, this is the way of making it possible ²⁶.

²⁵ Ibidem, p. 69.

²⁶ Cf. MEIER, H., *Leo Strauss y el problema teológico-político*, pp. 15-21.

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