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UTILITARIAN POSTMODERNISTS AND THE OFFICE OF SPECIAL PLANS

I've always been curious about the Gary Schmitt and Abram Shulsky (S&S) essay "Leo Strauss and the World of Intelligence (By Which We Do Not Mean Nous)." But I was too lazy to hunt it down.

Now that Pat Lang has helpfully provided a link (PDF), I've finally read it.

There are several analyses of the essay's implications for intelligence gathering. Lang provides a historically-grounded one from David Habbakuk (PDF). Tom Barry analyzes the concrete implications of S&S's thought for intelligence. Seymour Hersh addresses it briefly here in the context of the Office of Special Plans.

None of these analyses consider how close S&S come in this essay to admitting the similarities between Straussian thought and postmodernism—or what that admission portends for our intelligence programs. I'd like to make the case that S&S articulate the stance of Utilitarian Postmodernists in this essay and that the essay is a recipe for the creation and manipulation of narratives rather than a program for a different kind of intelligence program.

S&S first bring up postmodernism to discredit criticisms of Strauss's esoteric reading.

Many critics argued that it gave license for fanciful and arbitrary interpretation of texts; once one asserted that an author's true views might be the opposite of those that appear on the surface of his writings, it might seem that the sky was the limit in terms of how far from the author's apparent views one could wander. However, the deeper reason for the unpopularity of this doctrine was different; after all, Strauss was a piker compared to the very popular (at least for a while) doctrine of deconstructionism which gave readers complete carte blanche when it came to interpreting texts, and which completely lacked the rigor Strauss brought to the problem of textual interpretation.

Habbakuk notes how ridiculous this logic is. Whatever the failures of deconstruction, proving

its failures (which S&S don't do) does not make a case for the strengths of Straussian analysis.

Frankly, much deconstructionist analysis is shoddy. But a good deal of it is incredibly rigorous. Indeed, good deconstruction offers a means of discovering just the kind of hidden meaning that I understand Strauss's followers to seek. With one important distinction—the role of intention. Straussians treat this esoteric reading as intentional, whereas deconstruction does not assume the author's intention is primary or even necessary at all.

Now, the real failure of deconstructionism and other postmodernist approaches to analysis is not so much the leeway they offer (that's a factor of academic self-discipline rather than the method itself). Rather, it's the way they endorse a kind of passivity. The object of postmodern analysis, in most instances, goes no further than observation. You point to the structures of power inherent to the texts that make up our reality and ... that's about it. You get tenure, write three more books making such observations, and retire with your fourth wife, a former graduate student of yours, in the South of France.

None of the great postmodern theorists took the obvious next step: Admit that (at least within the realm of power—I'll leave the refutations of gravity to others) competing narratives can and do have the power to create reality, regardless of the veracity of those narratives. And then tell people how they can use that observation to change the existing power structures.

Perhaps this failure had to do with the postmodernist approach to intention, the belief that authors cannot fully execute their own intentions. If you believe the author has limited power, then why advocate for a more politically engaged role for authors?

But the Straussians, with their opposite approach to intention, have gone the next logical step, taken an observation about the way

narratives affect power, and used it to accumulate power themselves. Thus the moniker, Utilitarian Postmodernism.

Which is what I think S&S admit they're doing when they make their second mention of postmodernism.

Rather, the dissatisfaction was political in origin; the notion of esoteric writing is clearly at odds with the main political tenet of the Enlightenment, i.e., that a good polity can be built on the basis of doctrines that not only are true but are also accessible: their truth can be "self-evident" (to quote the Declaration of Independence) to the average citizen. Even those post-moderns who no longer believe that it is possible to discover any truths at all on which a free polity might be based somehow still cling to freedom of speech, which was originally defended on the grounds that the propagation of anti-republican heresies can do no harm as long as pro-republican truths are left free to refute them.

Be this as it may, Strauss's view certainly alerts one to the possibility that political life may be closely linked to deception. Indeed, it suggests that deception is the norm in political life, and the hope, to say nothing of the expectation, of establishing a politics that can dispense with it is the exception.

The first paragraph is a fair critique of Enlightenment aspirations. The Enlightenment (and, more recently, Jurgen Habermas) claim you can achieve more reasoned government by subjecting political decisions to scrutiny and rational debate. I don't much care for S&S's insinuation that the "average citizen" just can't get much that transpires in political discussions. But I think they're right—if your

entire political system assumes a certain transparency, a truthfulness in argumentative statements, it leaves your system incredibly vulnerable to those who exploit this assumption and tell lies.

(Note, some of my academic work examines the non-rational, purportedly fictional interventions in the public sphere that Habermas ignores to make his historical claim that a golden age of rational speech once existed. Such study makes me confident that these interventions can be just as valuable—and potentially empowering—as Habermas' favored true rational speech. So I disagree with S&S's portrayal of the trap postmodernism gets into with democracy.)

But now look at what S&S are suggesting about their own, Straussian project. They use postmodernism to illustrate the problem that deception presents for democracy. And then they proclaim that deception is inevitable in political speech. You'd think they'd then say democracy is impossible. But they don't do this.

Effectively, they're admitting that democracy is vulnerable to manipulation by deceptive speech. But they're going to exploit that vulnerability to their own advantage.

So what does this have to do with intelligence gathering?

The analyses I linked to above assume S&S advocate an intelligence that takes a different approach to discover the truth, but still tries to discover it. This still assumes intelligence practitioners will take the role of the postmodern academic—as passive observers. They assume that S&S are only disputing the method of analysis, rather than the role of intelligence in general. So, for example, Habbakuk shows the results that presuming deception rather than evaluating deception may have had.

So it would come as no surprise to find disciples of Strauss inclined simply to take for granted that opponents are

attempting to deceive them – rather than treating the possibility of deception as a hypothesis that needs to be tested. Ironically, moreover, when one is dealing with murderous thugs and shameless rascals, precisely the difficult hypothesis to consider is often not that they are lying but that, however brazenly they may have lied in the past, in a given instance they are telling the truth. And prejudging the issue in such a way can mean not simply a specific error – but the development of a question and answer complex which is radically false. So, for example, if one started off assuming that Saddam was concealing the existence of active weapons of mass destruction programmes, one would not explore the implications of the hypothesis that he had no such programmes. One implication of such a hypothesis, obviously, would be that evidence suggesting he had such programmes would necessarily be false. Accordingly, questions as to the intentions and purposes behind the false evidence would arise. Among the directions in which such an investigation would naturally lead would be towards the possibility that some of the evidence produced by Ahmed Chalabi originated in Iran. So the question and answer complex generated from hypotheses about Saddam would necessarily entail hypotheses about the policy of the government in Tehran.

Presuming Saddam is deceiving you may blind you to the possibility that he's telling the truth, that he has no WMD (although I think the reality is different—to the extent the Neocons were fooled it's because they assumed Saddam was deceiving in the most obvious way, hiding his WMDs, rather than considering the possibility that Saddam was deceptively pretending he was hiding WMDs).

But I'm arguing that OSP didn't get fooled by Saddam or by Chalabi, as Habbakuk suggests. Rather, the critical deception was not Saddam's or, by itself, Chalabi's. It was that of OSP, which knowingly propagated Saddam's and Chalabi's deceptions to accomplish their goal—military intervention.

With their statements about postmodernism, S&S reveal their awareness of the implications that deceptive statements have for democracy. But they neither renounce their own brand of deceptive statement nor do they posit an alternative to democracy. And in the context of this awareness, they argue for a different kind of intelligence. Given this background, it seems S&S are arguing for an active, intelligence-producing role rather than intelligence gathering and analysis, no matter the method. And given what Shulsky's OSP produced (literally, produced), this seems to be the more accurate reading.

BUT DO THEY GET THE DRAFTS?