# All about Politics, Ancient and Modern

**Abstract**

Karl Popper and Leo Strauss were two German speaking philosophers of Jewish descent, both having lived under Hitler’s rule, deeply disturbed by the events of the Holocaust; both leaving their homelands to settle in English speaking countries and adopting the teaching profession. In spite of so many similarities, no two persons could have such opposing personalities as these two men. It is strange how similar experiences could lead to the development of completely opposite philosophies. On the one hand we have the peaceful and quiet politics of Popper, simple and straight forward, understandable and like a scientific theory open to criticism and verification. On the other hand however, are the political views of Strauss, a mystery wrapped in an enigma, leaving one to wonder where Strauss talks esoterically and where he is what he is, leaving behind a string of questions never to be answered with surety.  This article is a comparison of the political views of Popper and Strauss.

Popper and Strauss were two thinkers from Austria and Germany respectively. Although coming from similar backgrounds and having much in common yet no two persons could have such diametrically opposed thinking as these two brilliant men. The parallels were of minor importance when compared with the disparities. Both were of Jewish extract, but while Strauss’s family was orthodox but one with little knowledge of Judaism although fervent followers of rituals, Popper’s family had converted to Protestantism so he had no obvious link left with Judaism. He remained an atheist all his life and made no effort to explain his position. Strauss, though known to be a non-believer went out of way to explain the importance of religion in politics. His position on religion will be explained later in this chapter. Both had to leave homelands to settle in foreign lands but both were deeply disturbed by the rise of Nazism and following tragic events of World War II. It was the circumstances that led to the development of these events that played a vital role in the development of political philosophies of both our scholars. The same events affected differently both of them. To prevent any future Holocaust and to settle the Jewish question both had different solutions. Using the Popperian terminology Strauss may be called an ‘ancient’ and Popper can be labeled a ‘modern’.

One of the most influential interpretations of Plato’s Republic was given by Popper, who painted him as the worst enemy of liberalism and open society. Plato believed in the constant flux in things, and knew that nothing, absolutely nothing could escape this rule. The rule of change was itself unchanging and this change ultimately drove things towards decay. Nothing good had come out of this so Plato wished to arrest this change. He wanted to bring a social change which was based on his belief that man was the master of his destiny. He wished to design a socially engineered world in which nothing changed. Plato believed that a model for an ideal and unchanging state could be found in the distant past, in the dawn of history. Since things degenerate in time we could only find an example of an ideal state in the distant past and not in future which holds nothingbut decay. For Popper this was where Plato was found guilty of historicism for he tried to find the solution of an unchanging perfect state only in history. This is also where we are reminded of Strauss who like Plato looked for perfection in the past and here he had differences with Popper who being a man of science, rather looked into the future.

Signaling them out for trying to look for an answer to ‘how’ before trying to find an answer to ‘what’, Popper’s criticism also reached social sciences. That is, social sciences have to adopt a scientific methodology to proceed and succeed. Social sciences have to be like pure sciences. Strauss also criticized social sciences but for different reasons, not for being un-scientific but for being too inclined towards sciences and for believing only on empirical evidence, leaving no room for religion and this is what Strauss found to be objectionable. Popper, being a non-believer, did not miss religion and advocated a scientific up-gradation of social sciences. Coming back to Plato, Popper called his *Republic* an open disregard to liberalism, rights of common man and democracy.[[1]](#footnote-1) His proposals and suggestions for building an ideal state and of large scale social engineering are too harsh for a modern man. Plato gave a closed caste system, Popper criticized, a strict censorship of poetry and literature, elimination of family and all family values, communism of wives, children and property, and primarily the idea of an all-powerful, all authoritative philosopher king or a king philosopher.[[2]](#footnote-2) Above all, what a modern and scientific mind believing in freedom and democracy, would find absurd is his idea of an ideal world of which the material things in this world are a copy.

Popper’s open society is a rational society in which people are free to make their own decisions and have conscious preferences for selecting one thing instead of another. A tribal society is an irrational and closed society and Plato in his description of the ideal state came close to the tribal society where everything is done for the collective good of the tribe and individual lives and interests do not count. Plato’s was a totalitarian society and it was an attempt to impose a static pattern upon a society in the process of degeneration, an attempt to arrest decaying Greek society by imposing tribalism. For Popper, Plato’s admirers were quite misled by his philosophy and held him in great reverence and awe. They were dazzled by the originality of his ideas and completely failed to see the true, underlying meaning behind his, seemingly, great philosophical system. Plato did not like democracy, equality or freedom. He preferred uniformity to variety and stability to change. He also accused Plato of perverting the philosophy of Socrates. The Platonic caste system is self-created and unnatural. Strauss regarded the modern open societies to be feasible at a lower level of humanity. A mass or an all comprehensive cosmopolitan, universal society would lead to global despotism. Efforts for creating such a society were among one of the reasons of the crises of the West.

Meanwhile, Strauss’s interpretation of Plato stands in marked contrast to Popper’s views. Strauss regarded Plato a symbol of liberalism. While Popper was in favor of literal interpretation of Plato, Strauss stood in favor of a non-literal interpretation. Republic deals with such a variety of topics that it is hard to find out the exact topic of this dialogue. For Strauss the very reason Plato adopted a dialogue form for his writings were that he did not want to be straightforward in the expression of his views. He put his words into the mouth of others by making them his mouthpiece in order to avoid criticism. His work was an excellent piece of esotericism in the opinion of Strauss. He, perhaps, sarcastically suggested such a society in which people would be forced to live and work in perfect unison, like robot, and the sole purpose of their life, all their feelings, desires and emotions would be to serve the State and nothing would be personal or private. The reason why Plato had to go to all this trouble was perhaps the fate that befell Socrates for challenging and questioning the prevailing social and political order and suggesting new ideas of rationality. The end of Socrates made Plato go on guard and he pointed out the shortcomings of the Greek society in an esoteric way without making the criticism too obvious. But for Strauss he got the message through to the future generations. For Popper Plato was a totalitarian *par excellence* for founding his government on inequality and division, where humans were treated as dogs or robots with absolutely no regard to human feelings and religious convictions. For Strauss, Plato was a liberal *par excellence* who stood as a beacon for the suffering people chained in the old inhuman conventions of the tribal system, bereft of all freedom and liberty to choose their destiny.

Additionally, Strauss regarded Republic as an esoteric masterpiece written intelligently and wisely to hide the real meanings which were meant for the eyes of the clever few. Strauss’s arguments supporting Plato’s non-literal interpretation can be criticized on Popperian standards of verification and falsification. It can be pointed out that there really is no foolproof way of verifying an esoteric text as it falls outside the realm of rational debate and since it cannot be verified or falsified it cannot be believed. Strauss regarded Plato not an enemy of political liberalism but a resource for it.[[3]](#footnote-3) His Plato is a skeptic who is thoroughly aware of the limits and incompleteness of human knowledge. He perhaps wanted to protect philosophy from the corruption of political power or politics from the tyranny of the intellectuals who would impose their views on the state, kind of self-proclaimed guardians. May be for this reason he denied the possibility of a just city. Strauss claimed to find a support for liberal democracy in the ancient political philosophy because the ancients like the liberal democrats also believed in the idea of a mixed regime, finding a balance between the extremes of aristocracy and democracy.[[4]](#footnote-4) Strauss found Platonic dialogues skeptical, tolerant and open minded the opposite of what Popper portrayed him to be.

Both Popper and Strauss were against historicism and idealism and both considered these two to be intellectual and political danger but what they understood by historicism is certainly different. For Popper historicism was wrongly derived standards from history and conceived as inevitable and unchanging. Strauss defined historicism in his *Natural Right and History* as ‘the depressing spectacle of a disgraced variety of thoughts and beliefs’. For him it was an extreme form of modernity in which all actions of people were based on our historical influences and the era in which they lived.[[5]](#footnote-5) Our significance is relative to our time, place and society and this, in Strauss’s view leads to nihilism. Popper criticized Plato’s utopianism as dangerous, dogmatic and delusionary. He considered communism to be a form of utopianism. Utopianism as a blueprint of society is impossible. Large scale utopian social engineering demands a standard of perfection that is not only unnecessary but impracticable. Strauss was against every type of reformist impulses.

Plato like Machiavelli did not mind the use of propaganda or ‘noble lies’ to secure rule of a philosopher. Popper was against the use of deceit or force. He considered Plato to be the precursor of the moderns.[[6]](#footnote-6) On the other hand for Strauss the ‘noble lie’ was necessary for preserving the tradition of philosophy. Propaganda is necessary to secure political rule as well as for serving one self from political persecution. The masses who can never be persuaded or reconciled to come to a point of agreement are better left deluded by religion and social conventions. Strauss was an adversary of the moderns.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Plato was criticized by Popper for believing in the law of degeneration on the one hand and on the other hand he planned a detailed social engineering to arrest the process of change and return to nature and the original tribal ways.[[8]](#footnote-8) This was a contradiction. Popper was clear about his choice. He advocated an open society, freedom and individualism. Strauss, however, had a difficult choice between philosophy and city. The city is based upon opinions and is imperfect but it needs reason to protect it, and reason has to protect itself from opinion too.[[9]](#footnote-9) This is paradoxical. Strauss’s reason-revelation dilemma is like the mystery of esotericism. Nothing about him is simple and straightforward, a truly controversial figure. For Popper things were crystal clear. People need individual space, freedom of choice. No one is to be treated as a means to an end. Every individual is an end himself. Popper was against an absolute authority which for Plato was central to his system. Guardians had the absolute authority in Plato’s State. Plato was an anti-democrat. The matter of concern for Popper was that the influence of such authorities could rarely be challenged or criticized. He called it a threat to civilization if we fail to learn to criticize our intellectual heritage and accept everything without question.

For Strauss, Plato was not a totalitarian. He could see a resistance to totalitarianism in Plato in order to protect the modern world from the horrors of irrationality. Popper taking Plato literally, pronounced him to be a fascist for giving priority to one race over the others, for declaring Guardians to be the supreme race. It was probably reminiscent of Hitler’s idea of supremacy of the Aryan race. What the characters of the Dialogues spoke, Popper accepted it as such, taking things on surface value. Strauss was much more conscious. He believed on understanding Plato on the lines drawn by the Muslim philosophers. It was important for him to pay attention to the type of character of the interlocutors as it were in fact, their personalities that spoke.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The rights of the governed were focused on more than the rights of the governing authorities in Popper’s philosophy, while Strauss seemed to pay more attention to the ruling body. Like Machiavelli, his philosophy aimed at strengthening the rulers. Everything has to be the government way. For Popper a strong people, happy and free citizens would make a strong and just government. For Strauss a strong and not necessarily, just government would make a mechanically disciplined and strong nation. Popper negated all types of historical or religious restraints. Social institutions and not the governments need to be fortified. It is the task of politics to constitute an agenda to be implemented by means of piecemeal social engineering. He knew the difficulties involved. All attempts for any social action would be resisted but this resistance would prove brittle once the institutions have been well established. He was aware that the construction of such social institutions would require knowledge of regularities imposing limitations upon the possible achievements of such institutions.

The common people concerned more of Popper’s apprehensions; all people should be treated as ends in themselves. No one is to be sacrificed for the general well-being or the well-being of the state. The aim of public policy should be the alleviation of pain and it also serves to include alleviation of injustice, equal opportunities for all people to acquire a higher education and equal restrictions on liberty, which are necessary for social life.[[11]](#footnote-11) The political agenda is to be determined by social consensus. In his view a good social consensus could be achieved if people put aside their visions of good life that is to work out an intermediate stage suitable to all the people.[[12]](#footnote-12) The question is how can people be convinced to come to a single point regarding what is a good life? Strauss was not very wrong if he believed in chiding and guiding people to a consensus and better still simply ordering them in the language of religion to accept the decision made for them by the government.

Popper criticized the intellectuals for being undemocratic and for being an enemy of cosmopolitanism. He condemned them for their tendency towards moral tribalism.[[13]](#footnote-13) For him no one had the right to consider himself more valuable than any other person. Strauss believed in an elite class of philosophers who were designed, by default, for knowledge of the truth which the common herd of men, the vulgurs, was not fit to receive. The decisions have to be taken by the intellectual, the special few who have a good comprehension of things in their right perspective. All people cannot be brought to the same level of understanding let alone a common consensus. Popper highlighted the importance of democratic government because it is a government elected by the majority vote and if required can be removed with vote without resorting to force. Since chosen by majority vote citizens themselves are responsible for the actions of their government. He favored the use of force only against a non-democratic government because such governments cannot be removed by vote.

The term ‘protectionism’was introduced by Popper, and used it for the right of all the citizens to be protected by the state.[[14]](#footnote-14) This protectionism widens to include protection of people’s liberty and protection from economic exploitation and oppression of all kinds. So freedom is impossible unless protected by the state. Popper also believed in freedom with limitation because unlimited freedom only strengthens the powerful and this will inevitably lead to the powerful exploiting and oppressing the socially or economically weak. Popper explained, ‘The… paradox of freedom is the argument that freedom in the sense of absence of any restraining control must lead to very great restraints, since it makes the bully free to enslave the meek.’

When it comes to the freedom and rights of the people the state should not practice the policy of non-interference. The solution to all these problems is establishment of social institutions, enforced by the-state. He advocated an ‘economic interventionism’ in place of ‘unrestrained capitalism.’[[15]](#footnote-15) He went on to give an elaborate system including the safety of the rights of the old, the disabled, and unemployed. Social institutions are impersonal therefore can guarantee the rights of the people and in case the elected government fails no one would have any reason to blame democracy. Strong institutions survive the fall of weak and incompetent governments. What made democracy most attractive to Popper was that it enabled people to get rid of their rulers without violence and the right of the citizens to rationally judge the government and give critical feedback.

The idea of self-emancipation through knowledge was something Popper believed in. Every new advance in the field of science reveals to us our ignorance and fallibility. He considered all moral or intellectual authorities to be open to criticism and challenge but he was at the same time also aware of this fact that those who challenge are themselves fallible and cannot make unchallenged authority. Popper was basically anti-authoritarian. He did not accept the authority of either a person or an institution to be above criticism. He realized the importance of tradition and modern man’s inability to get rid of it. It is to be submitted to criticism. Strauss did not start any offensive against tradition and never dared to challenge it. He knew how deep rooted traditions were and there was perhaps no use of criticizing them. Popper had different reasons for compromising with tradition. He knew its place in human setup so he had to accept it and to cover up for his inability to find out a way to weaken its hold he brought in the criteria of rational criticism. Strauss on the contrary, held tradition important because he believed it is these traditions that bring to us the wisdom of the ancients, and because they help us make some sense out of the slippery world of science. He held them in respect.

Nationalism meanwhile does not have a place in Popper’s open society. With the growth in population and the development in commerce and trade, and the inter-mingling of populations the notion of nationalism cannot be realized. If any attempt is made to do that it would result in disaster as the world has seen many times during the course of history. The revival of nationalism and the principles of material self-determination in the recent times prove Popper to be right. They pose a great threat to the peace and stability of the world. A nation state gives recognition to a particular nation, its culture, religion and language. But in a nation state there is always a small minority of people who does not racially belong to the majority and have different religion and language. They are, technically speaking, not nationals according to definition of nationality, hence they are always treated as second class citizens and never enjoy the rights that the majority are accorded. The wave of nationalism in Germany during the Second World, in Yugoslavia and Eastern Europe are the examples that prove Popper right. Multiculturalism promotes toleration but toleration of diversity does not always come naturally.[[16]](#footnote-16) People have to be convinced and in Popper’s view deliberation is needed as to why multi-culturalism is valuable and how we can avoid many problems through it.[[17]](#footnote-17)Popper’s politics were concerned with the remedying of suffering including oppression on the basis of nationality. He was of the opinion that the protection of minorities was more important than political independence. For this he suggested public discussion and an agreement through general consensus as to the steps that need to be taken to remedy the problem of minorities and how to deal with all the unfavorable and unintended consequences of this.

Having a cosmopolitan approach in politics, Popper dreamt of an open society with an assimilated and integrated community with no religion, ethnic identity or nationality. In order to live peacefully in an overwhelmingly Christian society it was advisable to give as little offence as possible so it was better to assimilate. This was however an offence to Judaism. Such people were denounced as cowards. Popper proclaimed nationalism (including Jewish nationalism) and racialism to be evil. He had seen the consequences of the rise of German Nationalism. He called *The Open Society and Its Enemies* his war time effort. Both Popper and Strauss watched the unfolding of Nazi reign of terror and the aftermath of the Holocaust away from Germany. The effects of the Holocaust were revealed to both the thinkers in different manners. Popper turned away from religion and all its derivations and advocated a race and religion free society. Strauss on the other hand got more and more impressed by the importance of religion, whether he himself believed in it or not is a fact apart. Popper was a thoroughly secular person who had nothing to do with religion let alone Judaism. Strauss unlike Popper was an anti-assimilationist. He had long in his mind the problems related to German Jews. While still young he wrote a review article in which he mentioned his differences with the assimilationists as well as the Zionists.[[18]](#footnote-18) He was especially against the idea of assimilation because he thought the assimilationists had self-destructing tendencies.[[19]](#footnote-19) This was because they were willing to abandon their religious traditions like the belief in being the chosen people and belief in Messiah. The experience of ‘galut’ or exile worked in strengthening the Jewish faith.[[20]](#footnote-20) It taught them the art of surviving in the worst of scenarios. For Strauss assimilation was illusory. It deprived them of self-assurance of being a minority by putting their trust in humanity of civilization.

After exposing the emptiness of assimilationist promises he turned to Zionism to look for a solution to the Jewish problem. He knew that Jews could not wholly rely on the good will and benevolence of international community. He stressed the need for the Jewish community to act like a nation and get active. Though he criticized Zionism in the beginning but later concluded that it was the only way out for the Jews. In his views political means alone could not guarantee the survival of the Jews- they had to keep their faith strong for it is their faith that had helped them survive their trials and persecutions throughout history. Strauss, though an anti-assimilationist, quite easily assimilated and settled into the American society. In fact he was thankful to the Americans for providing a safe place for the Jews from their persecution in Europe.

Zionism, for Popper was the worst example of nationalism rather it was a form of racism. In an interview Popper criticized South Africa and Israel for having racial laws.[[21]](#footnote-21) Zionism in no way fitted into his liberal democratic philosophy which exercises the right to question every authority. For him what was condemnable was that the Jews who had been a victim of Hitler’s racism, had become racist themselves and had in fact taken their racism a step even further than the Nazis. They determined Jewishness by mother alone.[[22]](#footnote-22)Nationalism, he said, made way for racism. For Strauss, however, Zionism and Jewish nationalism were a vital factor for security and safety of the Jews all over the world, for their honor and their pride. Popper held it as an example of a closed tribal mentality. In Popperian open society individuals had the primary status and individualism was never compatible with nationalism. In reply to the Israeli criticism for being tolerant of inequalities under the Hapsburg regime in Austria, Popper pointed out the racist policy of the Israeli government and in turn he asked them how many Arab professors, army officers, and cabinet ministers the state of Israel had.[[23]](#footnote-23) He criticized nationalism in the strongest possible words, declaring it to be a primitive, irresponsible, irrational and neurotic mentality, a sort of claustrophobic unity.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Strauss had a deep respect for Zionism and its role in giving the Jews a sense of dignity and respect and in its demand for the right of political self-determination for the Jews. But this was not as simple as it sounded. It meant a break from the Jewish tradition of trust in God. This meant a reliance on one’s own power. The basic truth about politics was brought home to him in his study of Hobbes that ‘covenants without the sword are but words.’[[25]](#footnote-25) In other words power could not be separated from politics. Strauss also learnt that conflict between people and states was the core of political life. These ideas, Strauss got from Carl Schmitt, the German jurist and political theorist.[[26]](#footnote-26) It was Schmitt’s work, *The Concept of the Political* that inspired Strauss. Politics was the name of conflict between individuals and states and in this conflict were the power of politics. All attempts of reconciliation and on ending wars were the negation of politics. Strauss also argued, and Popper would surely disagree, that the idea of tolerance in liberal democracy not only concealed possibilities of intolerance but also led to renunciation of a basis for defending its own principles. Strauss added, ‘Absolute tolerance is altogether impossible,’ and when liberal democracy becomes relativistic it leads to an ‘abandonment of all standards including its own.’[[27]](#footnote-27)

Popper held the modern scientific civilization in high esteem. It had liberated man from the shackles of old narrow minded religious traditions and conservative approaches. He gave credit to the development of the scientific method and its application on social sciences. Things had never been so streamlined, in such perfect order. Every proposed social, political or scientific theory had to pass through the strainer of falsification. Modern man for Popper had a very clear understanding of his environment and had means at his disposal to master it. There was nothing to stop him. Science had blessed him with strength and purpose. Strauss had a different view of modernity. For him the most notable crises of modernity was the feeling of purposelessness in modern man. He had become directionless and did not know what he wanted. He had even lost distinction between good and bad, right and wrong. Things had become so relative and so mixed up. It was not so a few hundred years ago, a time Strauss was so nostalgic about.Men, then had a clear idea of right and wrong, good and evil and this Strauss called political philosophy. But this was no longer possible in the modern scientific age as political philosophy was no longer scientific or at least, this was what it was blamed for.

1. Steven B.Smith, ‘Leo Strauss’s Platonic Liberalism,’ *Political Theory* 28*,* no. 6 (2000): 787-809. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Steven B.Smith, ‘Leo Strauss’s Platonic Liberalism,’ *Political Theory* 28*,* no. 6 (2000): 787-809. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Steven B.Smith, ‘Leo Strauss’s Platonic Liberalism,’ *Political Theory* 28*,* no. 6 (2000): 787-809. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Melissa Lane, ‘Plato, Popper, Strauss, and Utopianism: Open Secrets?’ *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 16, no. 2 (1999): 119-42. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Melissa Lane, ‘Plato, Popper, Strauss, and Utopianism: Open Secrets?’ *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 16, no. 2 (1999): 119-42. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Arlene W. Smith, ‘The Socratic Narrative: A Democratic Reading of Plato’s Dialogues,’ *Political Theory* 37, no. 6 (2009): 728-53. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Arlene W. Smith, ‘The Socratic Narrative: A Democratic Reading of Plato’s Dialogues,’ *Political Theory* 37, no. 6 (2009): 728-53. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Jeremy Shearmur, *The Political Philosophy of Karl Popper* (London: Routledge, 1996), 20-22. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Jeremy Shearmur, *The Political Philosophy of Karl Popper* (London: Routledge, 1996), 20-22. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *Ibid.*, 28-29. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Jeremy Shearmur, *The Political Philosophy of Karl Popper* (London: Routledge, 1996), 28-29. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Jeremy Shearmur, *The Political Philosophy of Karl Popper* (London: Routledge, 1996), 28-29. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Steven B. Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 23-42. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Andrew Vincent, ‘Nationalism and The Open Society,’ *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory*, no. 107 (2005): 36-64. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Steven B. Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 184-90. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. *Ibid.*, 88-90. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-27)