Thymotic Politics: Sloterdijk, Strauss and neoconservatism

**Abstract**

This paper interrogates Peter Sloterdijk’s reading of the key Straussian concept of thymos. Thymos, translated as *spiritedness* by Strauss and also as *anger* and taken as the German *zorn* by Sloterdijk (in English translations as *rage*)*,* is presented as the basis of the political and a key precept of social change. Sloterdijk attempts to decouple Strauss from American neoconservatism, I argue that this is not as simple as Sloterdijk assumes. Any consideration of thymos must, I argue, take into account its meaning across the political spectrum. After briefly recalling the development of neoconservatism in Germany in the early twentieth century and then later in America I and compare this development with the recent rise in interest in Leo Strauss in China. I stress the continuity of Strauss’s understanding of the Schmittian concept of ‘the political’ in his later reading of thymos and emphasise the importance of myth in connecting the two. I then concentrate on the notion of thymos as presented by Strauss and his student Allan Bloom in their reading Plato’s *Republic*; this reading is supplemented by Strauss’s understanding of the concept of eros as it appears in his reading of Plato’s *Symposium*. For Strauss, eros and thymos have to be read together because the political revolves around their interrelation. Thymos is generated through unfulfilled eros and the love of one’s own, whilst fully developed eros, which Strauss conceives philosophy as, is absent of thymos and disregards the political. In his commentary Bloom makes money-making the political equivalent of philosophy and the final part of this paper develops this thought in light of the rise of neoliberalism. I conclude by stressing the value of an understanding of the use and control of thymos for the political but note the inherent instability of the concept. Sloterdijk’s adoption of the concept and his reading of Strauss, whilst not forcing him into the same authoritarianism as the neoconservatives, does highlight the challenge involved in building an alternative political paradigm to neoconservatism.

Peter Sloterdijk’s *Rage and Time* (2006) argues for the political significance of rage. To do this Sloterdijk turns to the Greek concept thymos which “signifies the impulsive centre of the proud self” (2006: 11). He places rage, or thymos, at the centre of an historical narrative spanning Homeric myth, Christian theology and revolutionary politics. Sloterdijk emphasises the Homeric form of thymos through the figure of Achilles, as “rage celebrates a force that frees human beings from vegetable numbness” (2006: 5). Sloterdijk’s contention is that “we have not only stopped to judge and feel like the peoples of old, we secretly despise them for remaining ‘children of their time’” (2006: 5). The loss of an understanding of rage, the dynamic force of the political, leaves modern Western culture cut-off from the political itself. We may infer that the contemporary subject is, without access to rage, trapped in this state of “vegetable numbness”. Furthermore, rage is described as that which elevates the human subject; “wherever rage flames up… the identification of the human being with his driving forces realises itself” (2006: 10). The thymotic soul is identified with the human, but “for everyday people the evidence of the moment remains out of reach” (2006: 10), Those who have been domesticated through the city are cut off from thymos and therefore from self-realisation.

The “proud self” desires prestige which is reliant upon intersubjective relationships, in other words, what is being re-developed is a politics of recognition. Sloterdijk attempts to build what he calls a “theory of thymotic unities” (2006: 20) which defines political groups through thymotic tension, or lack thereof. Within this schema, rhetoric is the field upon which thymos is controlled. “Thymotic unities”, the politics of group pride and recognition, act as carriers of thymos within the context of city, with the city being the arena in which thymos is domesticated. Within the group “rhetoric… is applied thymotics” (2006: 20). Rhetoric has the power to form a group by focusing individual rage, based on a supposed lack of recognition, towards collective action. Within the group collective pride acts to satisfy one through the success of another. Organised politics acts as an “economy of rage” (2006: 26) in which political organisation contains, stores and releases rage to enact political change in the anticipation of future satisfaction. Importantly, the act itself achieves a form of self-respect and gives pride to the enraged, satisfying the thymotic soul. It is through this that Sloterdijk reads the history of revolutionary politics.

Sloterdijk acknowledges that he owes a debt in his understanding of thymos to Leo Strauss. Sloterdijk believes it is through Strauss that we have come to know Plato as “the psychologist of self-respect” (2006: 23) through his theory of thymos. At this point Sloterdijk also cites, in a footnote, Francis Fukuyama whom we owe “one of the best summaries of the ancient and more recent discourses about thymos” in the “rich passages” of *The End of History and the Last Man* (2006: 233), Fukuyama’s best-selling book. Sloterdijk incorrectly notes that Fukuyama was a student of Strauss. Fukuyama was in fact taught by Allan Bloom, who was taught by Strauss, and later by Harvey Mansfield. Significantly, Bloom’s commentary on Plato’s *Republic* focuses much more heavily on thymos than does Strauss’s.

Fukuyama’s *End of History…*,Sloterdijk tells us, is one “of the few works of contemporary political philosophy that touch upon the essence of our time” (2006: 36). Sloterdijk’s argument should be understood as a response to the theory of thymos that is found in Strauss and Fukuyama, and also, though not acknowledged by Sloterdijk, Allan Bloom. For these Straussians liberal modernity has produced a situation where the Last Men, whose intellectual and material needs have been met, are in fact empty-chested (Fukuyama, 1992: 300-312). Sloterdijk follows Fukuyama who himself followed Strauss in reaction against Alexandre Kojève’s conception of the post-historical situation. In his correspondence with Kojève Strauss argued that the universal recognition that Kojève described would in fact be impossible. This is because “great men”, who strive for admiration, would not be satisfied when “great deeds” are no longer possible, “the fact that great deeds are impossible in the end-state, can lead precisely the best to a nihilistic denial of the end-state”. For Strauss the solution to the problem is that all become wise, because only the wise can be satisfied in the end-state, however, “if not all human beings becomes wise, then it follows that for almost all human beings the end-state is identical with the loss of their humanity” (Strauss, 2000: 233). Wisdom or philosophy are, in the Straussian schema, absent of thymos (Strauss, 2001: 243) and it is through philosophy, the highest form of eros, that satisfaction is had. This philosophic satisfaction is the only form of satisfaction possible in the end-state because it lacks interest in prestige.

Pride, admiration, and recognition also offer a form of satisfaction through thymos, though one that is for Strauss inherently lower than wisdom. However, at the end of history this thymotic satisfaction is denied, whilst for Strauss, philosophic wisdom is beyond the reach of all. Without a means of finding satisfaction the lot of the last man is understood as a pitiable one. Because they are unable to offer satisfaction, the liberal societies will always “be infiltrated by currents of free-floating dissatisfaction…. because human beings are condemned to suffer from thymotic unrest” (Sloterdijk, 2006: 39). Liberalism removes outlets for thymos yet it cannot provide a substitute for satisfaction meaning that apparently nihilistic unrest is a constant potential.

*Neoconservatism*

Sloterdijk claims that Strauss’s school has “largely and unjustly been claimed by political neoconservatives in the United States” (2006: 23). Sloterdijk gives the impression that Strauss has been an innocent victim of an intellectual hijacking by an unsavoury school of political thought. Through this Sloterdijk reveals that he either misunderstands Straussian philosophy or that he misunderstands neoconservative politics. Strauss had many students and those students have gone on to spread what should be understood as a Straussian teaching.

The relationship between Strauss and American neoconservatism is a complex one, it is certain that Strauss and students of Strauss taught many people who have gone on to be politically active and known as neoconservatives, especially those who became prominent in George W. Bush’s government. On the surface this makes Sloterdijk’s claim that this appropriation was “unjust” a difficult one to support. Sloterdijk is more convincing when he comments that “The fact that Fukuyama confesses his allegiance to the conservative camp in the United States does not commit his readers to share the same political affiliation.” (2006: 37). This comment is significant because it seems to reveal part of Sloterdijk’s project. Sloterdijk is attempting to appropriate the Straussian re-articulation of the theory of thymos for a non-conservative politics. To develop this further it will be necessary to go into more detail regarding Straussian philosophy, but first the relationship between Straussian thought and a neoconservative politics needs to be spelt out in more detail.

Neoconservatism is rooted in a pessimism regarding the outcome of modernity. This pessimism first took hold in Germany in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century; Gary D. Stark describes it thus:

German neoconservatism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was largely a movement of insecure segments of the middle class, especially the cultivated intelligentsia and various marginal petty-bourgeois strata which felt threatened by the entire process of modernization…

Neoconservatism represented a complete rejection not only of the political, social and economic effects of modernity, but also the liberal values and assumptions which formed its very basis. (Stark, 1981: 6-7)

This pessimism can most famously be seen in Oswald Spengler’s *Decline of the West* and in various books by Carl Schmitt of that period. Leo Strauss should also be counted in this tradition and when he left Germany in the 1930s he took this fundamental pessimism regarding modernity with him. This attitude towards modernity, and liberalism in particular, was later shared by the early thinkers of what became American neoconservatism, such as Irving Kristol and Norman Podhoretz. Beyond the prominent imperialists of the War on Terror, neoconservatism is better understood as a self-consciously moralistic form of discourse that developed in reaction to what was perceived as the nihilism of modernity. In very broad philosophical terms it is a response to the philosophical diagnosis of Nietzsche (Sheikh, 2008).

Rather than saying, as Sloterdijk does, that the American neoconservatives unfairly hijacked Straussian philosophy it is more accurate to say that Strauss and the American neoconservatives shared a common reaction against modernity. What Strauss does is certainly more philosophically rigorous than the American neoconservatives, but it is wrong to entirely remove one from the other. Strauss focused on was what he called “the crisis of modernity” (Strauss, 1989: 81-98) which he articulated through his reading of the history of political philosophy. The writings and political engagements of the American neoconservatives should be understood as a response to this crisis. Key to the Straussian response to modernity will be the theory of thymos.

This connection between Straussian philosophy and a particular reaction to liberal modernity, in both the German neoconservatism of the early twentieth century and post-war American neoconservatism, can further be seen in the recent rise in Chinese Straussianism. This interest has prompted the question, posed by Harvey Mansfield, “Why would Chinese scholars be interested in Leo Strauss?” (Quoted in Osnos, 2008).

A contemporary debate in Chinese intellectual circles has been one between the competing goals; national strength and stability or the autonomy of the individual and the limitation of government power. Within the former school there has been a renewed interest in classical literature, both Chinese and Western, among those working on the Western tradition the Straussians. According to Zhou, the Straussian have “been possibly the most popular, the most organised and the best funded” (Zhou, 2009: 129).

Key to the discovery of Strauss in China has been Liu Xiaofeng who encountered Strauss via the books of Heinrich Meier. This is significant because Meier’s account focuses on the early dialogue that Strauss had with Carl Schmitt (Meier, 1988 and 2007). This early period of Strauss’s thought, especially his commentary on Schmitt’s *The Concept of the Political*, empathises a critique of liberalism in the context of Weimar Germany and promotes an authoritarian, statist response. Indeed, according to Wang “Liu argues that the political context of current-day China is similar to that of post-Bismarck Germany. As a result of radical transformations in society cases of social inequality abound, leading to heated debates about the liberal economy and social justice.” (Wang, 2009: 130). Without a communist ideology the Chinese state, as it exists in and through the communist party, is legitimised only through economic development. This situation of impending de-legitimation is one that in the context of Weimar Germany Strauss saw as inherently dangerous (Strauss, 1968: 224-225) and so, according to Zheng, “Schmitt and Strauss Liu and Gan [Yang] provide the Chinese with new theoretical resources with which to analyse the issue of political legitimacy in China” (Zhang, 2013: 255). Following Schmitt and Strauss Liu argues for the development the “national myth” and a “homogenous community” to legitimise the Chinese state (Zhang, 2013: 256).

The cultural-political situation of contemporary China, one of breakneck capitalist development, rapid urbanization and cultural experimentation, is one where liberal modernity has enveloped traditional culture in all its forms. Contemporary China faces the situation in which, according to Lisa Rofel, “socialist experimentation” has been replaced with a conception of a “’universal human nature’ imagined as the essential ingredient of cosmopolitan worldliness. This model of human nature has the desiring subject as its core: the individual who operates through sexual, material, and affective self-interest.” (Rofel, 2007: 3). The production of the neoliberal subject in China will only continue as economic development demands the production of internal markets, thus necessitating a turn towards a consumer society that will require a further liberalisation of Chinese culture. For Wang “they [the Chinese Straussians] are concerned about the consequences of scepticism and nihilism, attributing these to liberalism and modernity. Chinese Straussians seek to reconcile traditional values with the modern world.” (Wang, 2009: 130). Harvey Mansfield thinks that Chinese intellectuals have seen “that liberalism in the West has lost its belief in itself, and they turn to Leo Strauss for conservatism that is based on principle” (quoted in Osnos, 2008). Suspicion towards modernity is the shared response of all neoconservatives and is something that Strauss produced an intellectual response to through his call to return to the ancient modes of political thought. The Strauss inspired return to ancient thought in the Chinese context has been spearheaded by Gan Yang who has argued that “we [the Chinese people] will perpetually remain in a culturally rootless situation” without a rediscovery of traditional modes of Chinese thought (Quoted in Zhang, 2013: 260). However, this rediscovery, principally of the Confucian tradition, should remain married to the market economy that has defined and shaped recent Chinese cultural politics.

According to Mark Lilla Chinese interest in Strauss (and Schmitt as well) “is a response to crisis—a widely shared belief that the millennia-long continuity of Chinese history has been broken” (Lilla, 2010). Chinese Straussians are both supporters of a strong state and are happy to encourage nationalist sentiment as a response to the forces of neoliberal globalisation and to protect Chinese culture. This mirrors American neoconservatives, such as Irving Kristol, who were suspicious of both social and, initially at least, economic liberalism (Kristol, 1978) because of its apparently amoral tendencies. Kristol, following Strauss, thought that this ambivalence has led the West towards a nihilism that threatens its very existence. It is important to note that neoconservatives like Kristol only became outspoken defenders of liberal economics during the late 1970s when they managed to marry economic liberalism and the cultural authoritarianism of ‘traditional values’ and nationalism. Straussian philosophy and neoconservatism helps to create a form of capitalist authoritarianism. The authoritarian element develops to protect the state from the social and economic problems associated with capitalism, as well as from the changing values brought about by the social liberalisation that is part and parcel of the expanding market. In the cultural-political situation of contemporary China it is, to answer Mansfield’s question, not surprising that China, a country with a tradition of engagement with Western philosophy, would be interested in Leo Strauss. What Strauss offers, as he has done in the US, is an antidote to the social disruptions driven and engendered by capitalist modernity that does not reject capitalism itself.

For this to happen it was important that Strauss, who was certainly ambivalent at best towards capitalism, was seemingly uninterested in developing a particularly sophisticated understanding of its workings. Strauss’s seminar on Karl Marx at the University of Chicago was, for example, co-taught with Joseph Cropsey with Cropsey tackling the more economic questions. This attitude toward modernity, focusing on the cultural but not the economic, therefore allows Straussian philosophy and neoconservatism to maintain what could be a potentially untenable relationship. What is produced is a cultural neoconservatism that acts as a foil for neoliberalism, deflecting the economic towards the cultural by reasserting the concepts of ancient thought in theory and “traditional values” in practice.

Sloterdijk is certainly trying to dissociate Strauss from the foreign policy neoconservatives who were prominent in George W. Bush’s government and who were notable for their key role in the neo-imperial foreign policy of post 2001 America. During the debate that led up to the invasion of Iraq the name of Leo Strauss became in indelibly connected to the popular discourse about the war (Minnowitz, 2009). This debate created a representation of Strauss as a bogeyman figure, the evil inspiration who was guiding American foreign policy. Strauss became a useful myth around whom the anti-war movement could construct a discourse and in this sense Sloterdijk is correct to try to claim Strauss as a thinker beyond the caricature of 2003. However, he is on less sturdy ground when he wants to separate Strauss from neoconservatism in general and especially any attempt to remove the neoconservatives from the ground of thymotic politics.

The significance of Sloterdijk’s use of Straussian philosophy and his too brief rejection of the neoconservative link grows when the specific concept that he adopts is considered. The key concept in *Rage and Time* is thymos and it is impossible to disconnect the Straussian understanding of thymos and the neo-imperialist foreign policy pursued by the neoconservatives in the administration of George W. Bush. Sloterdijk calls Bush’s War on Terror a “willingly induced fiction of a struggle for survival, which needed to be waged by the entire nation” (2006: 219), a fiction created by the neoconservatives “who do not hesitate to proudly conjure up the spectre of ‘World War IV’ [a reference to the book by Norman Podhoretz of that name], to suffocate, wherever possible, every sign of a new opposition in light of growing inequalities” (2006: 219). The neoconservative response to the Al Qaida attacks of 2001 represented a hugely significant use of the thymotic impulse, one that awoke the US from its post-historical slumber of the long 1990s. The neoconservatives recognised that period as such (Dorrien, 2004: 114-129) and were ready to take their opportunity to engage in a battle for recognition and prestige through the thymotic process of revenge. Through a reading Dumas’s *The Count of Monte Cristo* Sloterdijk argues that “the transition to practiced revenge presupposes that the revenger knows from the beginning where he needs to search for evil doers” (2006: 178) The original (though later changed) operational name of the invasion of Afghanistan, “Operation Infinite Justice” and the strategy employed in Iraq of “Shock and Awe” are powerful modern examples of the state use and application of the economy of rage.

Thymos and The Political

Strauss shared an early and important dialogue with Carl Schmitt whose “concept of the political” is maintained by Strauss in his later work, particularly in his reading of Plato’s *Republic*. In *The Concept of the Political* Schmitt states that, “The concept of the state presupposes the concept of the political.” (Schmitt, 1932: 19). The political is defined by the friend/enemy distinction and so the state is defined by whom it considers as its friends and enemies. In other words, for the state to exist it must have an enemy to be defined against.

The natural, default position is one of enmity and competition and so for Schmitt, “all genuine political theories presuppose man to be evil” (1932: 62). Man is a dangerous animal and political philosophy needs to begin from this premise. In a letter to Schmitt from 1932 Strauss sums up his reading:

…if I have correctly understood your opinion… it leads precisely to the conclusion that there is a *primary* tendency in human nature to form *exclusive groups…* The ultimate foundation of the Right is the principle of the natural evil of man; because man is by nature evil, he therefore needs *dominion*. But dominion can be established, that is, men can be unified, only in a unity *against* – against other men. Every association of men is *necessarily* a separation from other men. [emphasis in original] (Meier, 1988: 124)

Within this context liberalism represents the negation of the political, which Strauss calls an “anti-political mode of discourse” (Strauss, 1932: 84). In his commentary on *The Concept of the Political* Strauss cites Schmitt’s description of a “politics free weltenschauung, culture, civilisation, economy, morals, law, art, *entertainment*”, and calls it “a world without seriousness” (Strauss, 1932: 100). Strauss sees an additional problem to the one of political order, beyond the problem of political anarchy there is one of mass culture whichhe defines as “a culture which can be appropriated by the meanest capacities without any intellectual and moral effort whatsoever and at a very low monetary price.” (Strauss, 1968: 5) For Strauss the political produces virtue and so a world without the political is a world in the grip of nihilism and both Schmitt and Strauss equate the political to the subject itself (Strauss, 1932: 95). The fatal problem in the liberal discourse of the Weimar Republic was that it only achieved amnesia about the political, thus producing a space in which the forces of fascism could marshal dissatisfied thymos. The political, as thymos, remains in the liberal stat, and so “In order to remove the smokescreen over reality that liberalism produces, the political must be made apparent as such and as simply undeniable.” (1968: 84) The political needs to be revealed to the people so as to re-form them as a group and reproduce virtue, for Strauss this is the political task of the Right within the liberal state**.**

The Political and the Production of Belief

In a short commentary on Thucydides Strauss presents the Spartan explanation of the Earthquake of 464 BCE.“Their [the Corinthians] polluting action… [was] responsible for the great earthquake” (Strauss, 1983: 90 and Thucydides, 1954: 128). The Gods were punishing the Spartans and the Spartans held the Corinthians responsible for this. Importantly the Spartan earthquake, as Thucydides presents it, via the argument over who enraged the Gods, is one of the causes of the Peloponnesian war between Athens and Sparta (Thucydides, 1954: 128). Belief, as Strauss presents it, as a key element in the construction of thymos, may be important for the generation of meaning and the production of a sense of purpose, but, as is the case in the Peloponnesian war, it also produces effects that are beyond the control of the believers. Belief is beyond rational control.

For Strauss it is prudent to respect belief, “a political man must at least pretend to ‘look up’ to something to which at least the preponderant part of his society looks up.” (Strauss, 1968: 214) The person who thinks politically is aware of “political things”, that is to say the need for and use of the common opinions that constitute a particular society. Awareness of political things is an awareness of the particular beliefs of the particular society.

The particular society is a grouping of various individuals:

…hence, the key to the understanding of political things must be a theory of groups in general. Groups must have some cohesion, and groups change; we are then in need of a universal theory which tells us why or how groups cohere and why or how they change. (Strauss, 1968: 219)

The key to maintaining a group is an understanding of how groups work, but modern political science is lacking in that it claims that there cannot be “a single objective which is approved by all members of society” (1968: 219). Modern thought helps to create a situation in which group belief is made more difficult, this erodes the foundations of the group. Strauss says:

…every political society that ever has been or ever will be rests on a particular fundamental opinion which cannot be replaced by knowledge and hence is of necessity a particular or particularist society. (Strauss, 1968: x)

There is no politics without belief in the particular opinions of the given group and without the political it makes little sense to talk about society. Understanding belief and the construction of myth is therefore key to developing an understanding of the state.

Schmitt had initially developed this understanding of the state when he tried to balance the rational with the irrational via George Sorel’s use of myth. Myth here is a “theory of direct, active decision” (1923: 68), it produces the political act:

The ability to act, the capacity for heroism and all world-historical activities reside, according to Sorel, in the power of myth. Examples of such myths are the Greeks’ conception of fame and of a great name, the expectation of the Last Judgment in ancient Christianity, the belief in *vertu*, in revolutionary freedom during the French Revolution, and the national enthusiasm of the German war of liberation in 1813. Only in myth can the criterion be found for deciding whether one nation or a social group has a historical mission and has reached its historical moment. Out of the depths of a genuine life instinct, not out of reason or pragmatism, springs the great enthusiasm, the great moral decision and the great myth. In direct intuition the enthusiastic mass creates a mythical image that pushes its energy forward and gives it the strength for martyrdom as well as the courage to use force against others. (Schmitt, 1923: 68)

These myths are imaginings of the future, a better future in which the dreams of the present are made manifest, this mythic imagining of the future is necessary to inspire action.

For Sorel it was the general strike, “the myth in which socialism is wholly comprised” (1908: 118), which orders action. The myth serves a further purpose for Sorel by producing a sense of heroism and justice in the action, “socialists must be convinced that the work to which they are devoting themselves is a *serious, formidable and sublime work.*” (1908: 130) The cause must be believed to be just otherwise one would be unwilling to make a sacrifice for it. Power, in the imagination of those who wield it, must always be used for good because without the good there can be no prestige.

Sorel focuses on the myth of the protest and the general strike but it is clear that Schmitt does not consider this as the most powerful form of myth. “Sorel’s other examples of myth also prove that when they occur in the modern period, the stronger myth is national.” (Schmitt, 1923: 75) The myths of nationalism seem to take precedence over the myths of the Left. Schmitt does not dwell on why here, but this can be examined within his own framework. The myth of the nation is inherently about national glory and the oneness of the people, it regards prestige. On the other hand, the myths of the Left, such as the general strike, are aimed at producing economic justice. Economic justice, the struggle for a comfortable existence, lacks the transcendent prestige that national greatness apparently offers. Sorel notes that:

Socialist writers have often pointed out that the poorer classes have more than once allowed themselves to be massacred to no purpose, save to place power in the hands of new rulers who, with great astuteness, had managed to utilize for their own advantage a passing discontent of the people against the former authorities. (1908: 151)

This is a reason why Sorel’s work was of particular interest to Benito Mussolini (Miesel, 1950). Once it is accepted that people are susceptible to a mythic discourse an outcome favourable to the people is reliant upon the coincidence of the ends of both the leaders (the producers of the myth) and the people. Mythic discourses can be co-opted for any cause, so in his reading of the *Republic* Strauss argues that an outcome that is good for both ruler and ruled is merely due to a coincidence of the ends of the ruler with those of the ruled. A mutually beneficial outcome should not be assumed.

For Schmitt “wherever it comes to an open confrontation of the two myths, such as in Italy, the national myth has until today always been victorious.” (Schmitt, 1923: 75). Sloterdijk himself also makes this point in his brief history of what he calls the “rage revolution”. Sloterdijk notes that it has been the historic “function of leftist parties to organise the thymos of the disadvantaged” (2006: 144). Such organisation of the anger of the disadvantaged is exactly what Sorel had in mind through the use of myth of the general strike. Sloterdijk picks up on the same point as Sorel that the national myth appears to dominate economic antagonisms:

For the political processing of popular thymotic impulses, the eruption of war in 1914 constituted a serious break. Its immediate result consisted in the abrupt transformation of the largest portion of anticapitalist rage values into acute national antagonisms. (2010: 147)

Where anger exists it can be directed and put to use in a political cause. The orchestration of this anger places the accumulated power of the group into the hands of those who control that group’s anger. Such power, once organised and controlled, can be used for whatever purpose and it does not necessarily have to be to the advantage of the angry and disadvantaged.

With this in mind it is now necessary to turn to Strauss’s later writings where he explicitly focuses on the concept of thymos. I will now focus on the Straussian commentary on Plato’s *Republic* in order to draw out his reading. I will also use Allan Bloom’s commentary on the same dialogue in order to further develop the Straussian/neoconservative reading of thymos. Bloom was a student of Strauss who was himself the undergraduate teacher of Francis Fukuyama. Sloterdijk draws on Strauss and Fukuyama but fails to note the importance of Bloom in the development of theory of thymos. Indeed, the classicist Angie Hobbes cites Bloom, not Strauss or Fukuyama, as key to modern interpretations of thymos (Hobbes, 2000: xii). What follows is a commentary on the texts of Strauss and Bloom and not that of Plato per se. The readings of the Straussian school are particular, sometimes idiosyncratic, and have been accused of being a wilful misreading (Burnyeat, 1985; Hall, 1977) however, these debates are not my concern here.

*Thymos and Rhetoric*

The *Republic* begins with a dialogue between Socrates and Cephalus, followed by his son Polemarchus. The conclusion of this dialogue brings an angry Thrasymachus into the discussion.

Thrasymachus is a rhetorician, his is the art of winning an argument, and is not, unlike Socrates, necessarily concerned with knowledge of the good; “Thrasymachus contends that justice is the advantage of the stronger”. (Strauss, 1964: 74)

Strauss contends that Socrates’s discussion with Thrasymachus is the centre of the *Republic*. Special attention should be paid to Thrasymachus because he is placed on an equal footing with Socrates, unlike the latter’s other interlocutors. Thrasymachus and his art of rhetoric cannot be ignored. As well as representing “injustice incarnate, the tyrant” (Strauss, 1964: 74) Thrasymachus is also offering a “definition of justice that is really the same as the city’s” (Bloom, 1968: 326). Justice, as the advantage of the stronger, will be dependent upon who the strongest is:

…he explains that by “stronger” he means those who hold power in a city and constitute its sovereign, whether that sovereign consists of the people, the rich, the well-born, or a single man. The just is whatever the sovereign in its laws says is just. (Bloom, 1968: 326)

Thrasymachus’s idea of justice “is the thesis of the city itself” (Strauss, 1964: 75). Justice is obeying the law and no regime can accept an authority that is higher than it. In order to remain legitimate the regime of the city must be the sole arbiter of law. The second part of this understanding is that:

…each regime lays down the laws with a view to its own preservation and wellbeing, to its own advantage. From this it follows that obedience to the laws or justice is not necessarily to the advantage of those who do not belong to the regime or of the ruled but may be bad for them. (Strauss, 1964: 76)

The regime will make law that is to its own advantage and this is not necessarily the same as the advantage of the ruled. For the laws to be good for the ruled requires a coincidence of their and the rulers advantage.

Thrasymachus resembles the city through his art:

Being a rhetorician, he resembles the sophist, and the sophist *par excellence* is the city. Thrasymachus’s rhetoric was especially concerned with both arousing and appeasing the angry passions of the multitude. (Strauss, 1964: 78)

Thrasymachus introduces thymos into the dialogue and this introduction is related to his art of rhetoric, for him “anger or spiritedness is not the core of his being but subordinate to his art” (Strauss, 1964: 78). Thrasymachus is not actually angry, he is playing at it for rhetorical effect. His indignation is meant to close down dialogue by producing a taboo on what can and cannot be said. Such a rhetorical device can only work in public where the angry display can produce an emotional response from the spectator, this can make a reasoned answer impossible due to the now heightened emotional atmosphere. A modern case in point, as already indicated by Sloterdijk, are the debates surrounding the invasion of Iraq, where anger and indignation helped to close down aspects of the discussion, particularly those voices which questioned the wisdom of invasion (Lucas, 2004: ch. seven). Thrasymachus represents the power of the emotive in political discourse and it is this use of emotion that the American neoconservatives have demonstrated an instinctive appreciation of. The neoconservative understanding of the rhetorical power of thymos demonstrates the importance of the concept and makes Sloterdijk’s easy dismissal of the neoconservative adoption of Strauss problematic. Any theory of thymos as a political tool has to take into account that it is beholden to the will of the person who can orchestrate it, the figure that Plato presents through Thrasymachus. The person who can orchestrate thymos holds power and can set the parameters of any contest. For the city to develop, the anger of Thrasymachus must be soothed and he has to be tamed because in order for Socrates to imagine the best city the art of Thrasymachus will be necessary.

Spiritedness is a key term in the *Republic* and is the usual translation of thymos, of which Bloom says it:

…expresses one of the most important notions in the book. Thymos is the principle or seat of anger or rage. It might well be translated as that pregnant word “heart”, which mirrors the complexity of the Greek. (Bloom, 1968: 449)

Thymos is the essence of the political, it is thymotic anger that makes one want to harm one’s enemies and it is the art of rhetoric that can stir anger. Power exists in the control of anger and this control lends legitimacy to the rulers who may “need the art of persuasion in order to persuade their subjects that the laws which are framed with exclusive regard to the benefit of the rulers serve the benefit of the subjects.” (Strauss, 1964: 80) The rhetorical art produces the political, when Socrates needs a class of guardians to watch over the just city he will need to control thymos in order to keep this class in check.

Thrasymachus is the only character in the *Republic* who practices an art. An artisan does a job that he or she is skilled at. In the just city each person will practice their art in full dedication to the city “without minding his own advantage, only for the good of others or for the common good” (Strauss, 1964: 79). To this, Thrasymachus accuses Socrates of being simple minded, artisans do not necessarily practice their art for the common good, Thrasymachus is the perfect example of this. The artisan in fact practices two arts, the particular art and the universal art, “the art of arts, is the art of money-making” (Strauss, 1964: 81). This view is consistent with Thrasymachus’s understanding of justice as the benefit of the stronger. The money-making art is directed at self-interest and subsumes all other arts. These lesser arts are now only practised as a means to money-making. Bloom expands on this by claiming that money-making is a political substitute for philosophy (1968: 334).

The Founding of the City and the Orchestration of Thymos

Book two brings Glaucon and Adeimantus into the dialogue. Both are “excellent young men” who are drawn to politics and would make excellent students for Thrasymachus who:

…offers them the means of success, both by the tools of persuasion he can provide and by the liberating insight into the nature of political life on which his teaching is based. In effect Thrasymachus tells them that in their pursuit of glory they need not be hampered by considerations of justice. (Bloom, 1968: 339)

Book two presents a struggle for the souls of Glaucon and Adiemantus between Socrates and Thrasymachus, this struggle represents a struggle for the city itself, one between wisdom and anger. Socrates tempts the vanity of the brothers with the possibility of founding a city in speech. The city is founded in three stages, the healthy city, the purified city and the city of beauty. In the first city, presented by Adeimantus, men join together because alone they cannot provide for all of their needs. This will be common to all of the cities, what will change is the understanding of the needs. In this city “each man chooses an art according to his natural capacities so that nothing in life goes against the grain of the inhabitant’s desires or talents” (Bloom, 1968: 344). Each individual works for his/her own advantage but this is the same as the common good. In the healthy city there is a coincidence of private and public good. “The healthy city is a happy city; it knows no poverty no coercion or government, no war and no eating of animals” (Strauss, 1964: 94). The healthy city is just, but the people do not concern themselves with justice, they simply do as they want.

However, needs in the healthy city “are entirely directed to the preservation and comfort of the body” (Bloom, 1968: 345). The suggestion is that these needs, such as food and shelter are simple to satisfy. What is not present in this city are the “desires of the soul… the healthy city may be just in a sense but it surely lacks virtue or excellence” (Strauss, 1964: 95). The healthy city lacks a desire for prestige but “human beings require more than life; they demand unnecessary refinement and pleasure” (Bloom, 1968: 345). Glaucon, an erotic man, is dissatisfied with his brother’s city, which he calls the city of pigs. The anarchic society of the healthy city “would be possible if men could remain innocent… ‘self-realisation’ is not essentially in harmony with sociability” (Strauss, 1964: 95). Glaucon’s presence, his feeling of lack, his desire for something more will corrupt the healthy city, “his desires are inchoate expressions of his inclination to a fulfilment of which he is yet unaware” (Bloom, 1968: 345). Glaucon’s desire makes him a “dangerous man but also an eminently interesting and educable one.” (Bloom, 1968: 345) His desire means that he is opposed to convention, will challenge the city and has the potential for good or evil. However, Glaucon’s desire “if fully developed, would find its satisfaction only in contemplation” (Bloom, 1968: 345), not through action. Glaucon may find satisfaction through pride and prestige but he is also capable of a higher form of satisfaction through wisdom.

The expansion of desire necessitates the expansion of the city, this expansion will inevitably lead to conflict with other cities and so there will be a need for an army; the city now turns into the “armed camp” – the purified city. This city is a political city and has enemies who have been provoked by the expansion of desire. In order to wage war and expand the city to match the growing desire a new class of citizen is needed - the warriors. This is a class who are devoted to the art of war “and in their souls emerges a new principle, spiritedness” (Bloom, 1968: 348). Thymos makes men capable of anger and inspires them to defend the city. What characterises thymos is that it overcomes desire, it is not dedicated towards self-preservation and it can be indifferent to life, “The city may exist for life, but it needs men who are willing to die for it” (Bloom, 1968: 348). Not being concerned with mere life, “spiritedness is beyond the economic system” (Bloom, 1968: 349), it is not concerned with vulgar gain but neither is it capable of wisdom.

The city is split into two classes, one motivated by bodily desire and the other by spiritedness. Bloom notes that a need for a third class is implied because the warriors are described as noble guard dogs, there will have to be a class of rulers to control these warriors. The warriors “will inevitably be the sole possessors of political power” (Strauss, 1964: 97) because they will hold a monopoly on violence. The education of the warriors will therefore become the focus of the dialogue, leading to the underlying political premise that power is based on the control of violence. The key to holding and using political power will be the orchestration of thymos. The organisation of violence will be needed to help to satisfy and sometimes subdue the complex desire that corrupts Adeimantus’s healthy city. At this point it is only the warriors who will need to have this sort of education because it is their violence that will need to be focused:

…the education of the guardians must make sure that they will not practice thievery and the like except perhaps against a foreign enemy… The education which the warriors more than anyone else need is therefore in civic virtue. (Strauss, 1964: 97)

The guardians will have to be able to recognise an enemy of the city, either internally or externally and be willing to remove that threat. They will also need to be just, they cannot use their monopoly of violence for their own interests, and they must work only for the good of the city, or at least the rulers of the city.

The warrior class will have to have a touch of the fanatic about them, they have to be willing to sacrifice themselves for the city but also, and perhaps more ordinarily, they have to enforce the law within the city. The fanatic, as the most intense form of the thymotic person, cannot stand a taboo to be broken; the fanatic is compelled to enforce nomos. This implies that nomos and thymos are related. Law comes from anger because it is anger that inspires one to enforce the taboo and the taboo only stands if breaking it is punishable and there is a will to punish. Just as in Sorel’s understanding of myth, the warrior is self-righteous, the warrior is firm in his conviction that his/her actions are correct.

The education of the guardians will be through poetry, “the poets are taken most seriously as the makers of the horizon which constitutes the limit of men’s desire and aspiration” (Bloom, 1968: 351). Poets tell stories of great people. The people celebrated by a particular political community, those upon whom the myth will be constructed, will be intimately related to the character of that political community. “As we know, untrue stories are needed not only for little children, but also for grown up citizens” (Strauss, 1964: 98). It is the nature of these untrue stories, the histories, heroes and theologies of the city that will determine the nature of the citizen of that city:

…the man who admires Achilles is different from the one who admires Moses or Jesus. The different men see different things in the world and, although they may partake of a common human nature, they develop very different aspects of that nature. (Bloom, 1968: 351)

Eros

Strauss reveals the political significance of eros as well as thymos, but they are dealt with separately. This is because they represent polarities, the political and the non-political. Eros is absent from the *Republic* because is it absent from the political so Strauss turns to another dialogue, the *Symposium.* Eros is particularly significant for Strauss because it is the philosophic passion; the highest form of eros is philosophic eros and the philosophic life is also understood as the good life. The political is absent from the philosophic life and this means that the philosopher is “blind to the context within which philosophy exists, namely political life” (Strauss, 2001: 6). Philosophy lacks thymos and cannot produce rhetoric and it is unable to produce the political. Eros seeks a form of satisfaction that is absent of thymos, this is true for both philosophic eros and the eroticised mass-culture of the end of history.

But the eros of mass-culture is not ultimately satisfying, thymos does not therefore disappear in a post-political age. The rage remains but it is left without something to coalesce around. Strauss, following Schmitt, saw this as an inherently dangerous situation because thymos, the political passion, “is essential for constituting the polis and is, in a way, most characteristic of the polis” (Strauss, 2001: 9). The state, in other words, is thymos that has been orchestrated by rhetoric.

Thymos is orchestrated in the state primarily through the love of one’s own; it is via the group that prestige is sought and granted and so for Strauss, “love of one’s own, self-love, inspires indeed all human action” (Strauss, 2001: 225). This idea is clarified when Strauss says “all which we call interesting in human beings is in the sphere of thymos” (2001: 244). The desire for prestige as the manifestation of thymos is the basis of what Strauss will call “great deeds” and which Fukuyama sees as being in decline in the post-historical state (Fukuyama, 1993). But thymos, despite its lack of an outlet is still present. Eros is different, it is neither interested in prestige nor the social:

The calculating man never forgets himself. The madman, mad for good or ill, forgets himself. This self-forgetting can merely be low, but it can also be higher than any calculation. In eros, then, there is a complete forgetting of oneself, a complete forgetting of one’s own. (Strauss, 2001: 218)

The erotic is as little interested in the calculation of future gain as it is in performing great deeds in hope of prestige. The highest form of eros is self-forgetting and also forgetting of others, which means that it is non-political as it is not interested in the community, “Eros is homeless” (Strauss, 2001: 243). The Straussian philosopher and the ardent consumer are not interested in the wellbeing of the community because to be so would deflect from the practice of philosophising or shopping. This tendency of eros to ignore the social is also present in capital where there is a contradiction between desire for profit and the interest of the group. Bloom therefore seems to be correct when he makes equivalence between money-making and philosophy. However, it is the eros of money-making that has come dominate, this leads only to dissatisfaction because thymos is “incompatible with the market.” (Sloterdijk, 2006: 210).

Thymos Today

What has been the fate of the economies of rage? For Sloterdijk the post-historical period is characterised by the removal of thymos from view, which is also the Straussian conclusion. For Fukuyama, following Strauss’s critique of Kojève, thymos becomes unemployed without access to “great deeds”. For the political neoconservatives in America the end of the cold war took away a sphere of existential struggle that had given order to the prideful self (Dorrien, 2004: 69-70). More recently Harvey Mansfield has described the hiding of thymos as developing a crisis of what he defines as “manliness”, an effect of the feminist revolution of the twentieth century (Mansfield, 2006).

Although Sloterdijk is sympathetic to the mobilisation of a thymotic politics of the Left this is muddied by the fact that the organisation of rage, indeed, the development of rage from the bare feeling of dissatisfaction at something as yet undefined, stems from rhetoric. Rhetoric gives the ability to cultivate and then direct dissatisfaction into the thymotic economy, but, as Plato revealed, the direction of thymos is not necessarily for the good of all. Sloterdijk tells us that “it is part of the function of leftist parties to organise the thymos of the disadvantaged” (2006: 145), but this role has not given the Left a monopoly on the organisation of the disadvantaged. Fascism offers an alternative model for thymotic organisation, “Its modus operandi is the melting of the population into one thymotically mobilised pack, which takes itself to be unified in its claim to the greatness of the national collective” (2006: 152). The rage of the right steps in where it can to direct, often economic, injustices towards ethnic and national concerns. Sloterdijk himself knows that this has been part of the success of the neoconservatives in America who, as was noted earlier managed to “suffocate, wherever possible, every sign of a new opposition in light of growing inequalities” (2006: 219).

Sloterdijk notes how “sovereignty refers to the capacity to convincingly threaten someone” (2006: 216) through organised and directed thymos. From the 1980s onwards, following the decline and eventual collapse of the Soviet Union, workers’ ability to convincingly threaten was diminished. This meant that any anger emanating from the workers had less and less to coalesce around and was easily dissipated. Since the dawn of neoliberalism the explosion in wealth inequality, as well as ever-increasing job insecurity, has met barely a whimper of effective dissent in the capitalist centre as there is nothing for any anger to form around, opposition lacks a mythic structure. Sloterdijk sees that “The relationships of sovereignty have been reversed overnight: organizations of employees have little power to threaten, because the privilege to threaten has, rather one-sidedly, passed onto the business side” (2006: 217).

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the economic and ideological transformations of other communist regimes has ushered in a period in which organisations of the Left have abandoned the economy of rage. This was epitomised by Tony Blair’s New Labour in the UK, which “ceased being pride and rage parties and acknowledged the primacy of appetites” (2006: 202). This reading is nothing new, it has been made convincingly and from a similar perspective by Chantal Mouffe in her appropriation of Carl Schmitt (Mouffe, 1993; 2000 and 2005). Contemporary politics has been defined by the absence of any narratives willing or able to organise thymos in a traditional Leftist way. This is not to say that thymotic organisation has disappeared, the neoconservative response to the Al Qaida attacks of 2001, with the wholehearted support of Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair, cultivated an anti-Islamic rage economy in the West which remains a pillar of far-Right political organisation.

For Sloterdijk, “no movements and parties are visible that could once again take on the functions of a world bank for the utopian-prophetic use of thymotic impulses” (2006: 203). The collapse of myth coupled with the triumph of consumerist eros and the subsequent inability to turn thymos into the political is the essence of the post-political. The ideology of individualism that is expressed through neoliberalism leaves anger separated and unable to coalesce in a group around a mythic project. The market, built upon the unchallenged notion of the pursuit of self-interest and mired in erotic self-obsession, rejects any attempt to imagine a future as utopian folly.

The stoicism of the Straussian vision of philosophy is an apt resting place, premised on a “political philosophy” that encourages acceptance of the status quo in favour of an inward philosophy seeking the philosophical experience of the good. Straussian philosophy is perfectly married to the neoliberal age because it excludes thymos from philosophy, “Indignation has no place in philosophy” (2001: 243). Shame is also absent from eros and so from philosophy and money-making (Bloom, 1968: 382). Sloterdijk notes that thymos “first expresses itself in shame” (2006: 23), which speaks to Bloom’s assertion that demands of social convention “are enforced by shame” (1968: 382). Eros is not tempted by prestige and neoliberalism has no shame. The politics of austerity has demonstrated this.

In an age of growing inequality characterised by over-compensation for elites (2006: 200) and greed induced financial crisis followed by austerity for the least able to cope with it, there has been a failure of Left parties to organise dissatisfaction into a political force capable of resisting the demands of neoliberal elites. Writing during the economic boom before the financial crisis, during which growth filtered to the top, Sloterdijk notes “In this situation, the return to ethnic or subcultural narrative is not surprising” (2006: 205). Nor should it be surprising that the rise of the far right in Europe, a trend that predates the financial crisis and the imposition of austerity, has accelerated in recent years. Over-compensation for the few has for a long time necessitated under-compensation for the many, yet this class antagonism has been ignored by the former heart of such a politics – the parties of the Left. Rising nationalist sentiment is also the context of contemporary China. The interest in Strauss is symptomatic of politics that embraces neoliberalism but seeks a way back into both traditional Chinese thought and a disappearance into contemplation, and a thymotic nationalism that has replaced the revolutionary organisation of Maoism.

The collapse of the ability of the Left to order and distribute the rage of the under-compensated for their own benefit has much to do with the history of the thymotic politics of the Left. Sloterdijk describes the “tragedy” of the first days of the Russian revolution when “during the fall of 1918, workers in Petrograd were called on to commit massacres against Russian social democrats” (2006: 147) thus beginning the “barbarous methods” that eventually defined Soviet politics and later the politics of Maoism. This popularly understood history, as well gross economic mismanagement, discredited the Left to such a degree that submission to neoliberalism, typified in Bill Clinton and Tony Blair, became inevitable. “Looking at these principles reveals the paradox of revolutionary politics in general. Revolutionary politics has always devoted itself to the task of determining the right measure for something that, by itself, strives for what is ‘without measure’” (2006: 176). This paradox, where the careful cultivation of thymos, which it must not be forgotten is formed of the irrational, is unable to remain contained. Thymos goes beyond the ability to control it, it is at times necessarily excessive. A thymotic politics will always carry this danger within itself and is something that Bloom is specific about (Bloom, 1968: 409). It is this double edged nature of thymotic politics that makes any proposed return in the Western context so difficult to imagine, and why Sloterdijk’s conclusion comes with title “Beyond Resentment” (2006: 227) and a call to “delegitimize the inherited fatal alliance of intelligence and resentment to create a space for future paradigms of detoxified worldly wisdom” (2006: 228). It is this hope, this appeal to a universal wisdom that would produce some form of post-historical satisfaction that is both beyond a politics and rage and the eroticised mass culture of neoliberalism that, in the end, mark Sloterdijk’s separateness from Strauss and the neoconservatives.

Strauss found the idea of generalised wisdom at the end of history impossible. However, Strauss’s rejection of universal wisdom does not appear to be due to potentiality and instead intimates that such a universal wisdom would be impossible for financial reasons (Strauss, 1968: 12-13). Wisdom is simply not possible for all. Thymos therefore remains and needs to be orchestrated so as not to become self-destructive. It seems that although Sloterdijk has sympathy with the analysis of Strauss and Fukuyama he does not want to share their pessimistic reactions. It is this faith in potentiality that demarks the difference between a conservatism that has to fall back on a thymotic politics reliant upon mythic constructions and the progressive “world culture” (2006: 229) characterised by wisdom that Sloterdijk imagines.

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