

Olga Maltseva  
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### The Central Concept of Struggle:

Sayyid Qutb, Leo Strauss, Modernity and the Past.

The concept of modernity constitutes a crisis in the eyes of contemporary philosophers. Leo Strauss and Sayyid Qutb—among the most influential in their fields and fathers of budding contemporary schools of thought—eloquently addressed the shortcomings of this concept. Although the crisis develops quite differently in Strauss’s “Progress or Return?” and Qutb’s *Milestones*, history plays a significant role in defining the cause of the problem and attempting to mitigate its effects on their respective societies. For both Qutb and Strauss, there is a distinct link between the degradation of civilization and its preceding departure from the “right way,” the definition of which is at least in part dependant upon the Holy Books of Islam and Judaism. Both men struggle with the same questions—How does the crisis manifest itself? Who is responsible? What can be done? Despite their differing approaches, they reach the same conclusion: that in order to strive for better results in the future, contemporary society must look to the past.

The “past” is quite an ambiguous concept, and deserves clarification. When speaking in the realm of philosophy, history tends to play a somewhat conceptual role in that it is not limited to the study of actual *events*. In fact, Strauss, for the purposes of “Progress or Return?” explicitly rejects this definition, and Qutb only speaks of actual events when referring to current or semi-current phenomena brought on by modernity. In the context of their greater philosophical arguments, the “past” is an aggregate of ideas that create an ideal state of being. In both Strauss’s and Qutb’s definitions, the past is a

time when society followed a favorable path. Qutb bases the “right” path strictly on the Qur’an and on Islamic society as it existed at its conception. Strauss, on the other hand, uses the Bible and Judaic society to illustrate problems of unqualified progress, basing the “right” path on a society which did not equate progressive with “good” and reactionary with “bad”—Western Civilization in its premodern state.<sup>1</sup> He maintains that a return to a simple, unquestioning time—in line with Biblical teachings—would place society back on track. Therefore, the past simply refers to a time when humanity was, in the eyes of Strauss and Qutb, on the right path—and before modernity was seen as a crisis.

Strauss and Qutb, although far from unique in looking to the past for answers, engage with the past by extolling its unqualified correctness and infallibility. The struggles of the authors—Bible versus Philosophy in the West and Islam versus Jahiliyyah, or pre-Islamic society, in the East—are central to the definition of the perfect “past.” The ultimate contradiction lies in the fact that modernity—their object of criticism and rejection—allows for the development of philosophies aimed at challenging it. If each author’s aims are achieved, and all is reverted to the past, society—the past—will remain ignorant to its own virtues. Whereas modernity allows for the telling of grievances, the past as Strauss and Qutb define it would allow only for eternal repetition, no challenge and no knowledge considered. Qutb’s philosophy, while allowing for Islam’s accommodation of science in line with its teachings, falls short where he defines the eternal struggle against Jahiliyyah as a central tenet. Strauss’s theories, likewise, fall apart: if society is built around the struggle between the Bible and Science, reverting to

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<sup>1</sup> Leo Strauss, “Progress or Return? The Contemporary Crisis in Western Civilization,” *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, 104.

the pre-modern past as he prefers it would only result in, due to lack of progress, a stagnation of that struggle. Thus, the element of struggle in both Strauss and Qutb's philosophies are essential, and an actual implementation would prove damaging to the very societies they seek to protect.

Modern philosophical thought is defined by Strauss as being anthropocentric in character, comprising a shift in morals, a concentration on science, and a development of thought that concentrates on man over God, the universe, or anything else.<sup>2</sup> Qutb, on the other hand, never explicitly defines modernity, instead choosing to reject it outright on the basis of Islamic teachings: "God is the Creator of the universe as well as of man... there is no difference between him and other inanimate objects."<sup>3</sup> Qutb's modernity is that which exists in jahili society; whether it be government not according to the Shari'a or the absence of morality, modernity is the opposite of the correct Islamic state. Qutb makes it obvious that modernity is more than just a theory; in its manifestation as the jahili societies of modern day, modernity becomes an "organized society" with "cooperation and loyalty between individuals," which is "always ready and alive to defend its existence."<sup>4</sup> Taking into consideration the vastly different definitions of modernity, the crisis which stems from it is equally in need of definition.

The crisis of modernity, according to Strauss, lies in the false assumption that progress actually yields favorable results. Strauss defines modernity as "an attempt to liberate the man's spirit and desire from priestly chains while keeping religion's natural utility and ground in view"—a secular outlook with morals rooted in religious

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<sup>2</sup> Strauss, 102.

<sup>3</sup> Sayyid Qutb, *Milestones*, 13 Nov. 2005. [http://www.youngmuslims.ca/online\\_library/books/milestones/hold/index\\_2.asp](http://www.youngmuslims.ca/online_library/books/milestones/hold/index_2.asp), Ch. 6.

<sup>4</sup> Qutb, Ch. 3.

teachings—a point which, according to Nietzsche, is quite contradictory, and, in fact, impossible.<sup>5</sup> Nietzsche marks the end of modern philosophy in his rejection of the use of Judeo-Christian concepts of universal morality without the religion that accompanies them; he opted for an entirely different system of morals. Perhaps this is why modern man, according to “Progress or Return?” is a being incapable of value judgment. Strauss initially asserts that progress began as an idea, and has subsequently turned into a belief—a sure sign that it is, essentially, a dying art. Yet, the modern man has learned to equate “good and bad” with “progressive and reactionary,” so as man begins to doubt progress, his judgment comes askew.<sup>6</sup> Modern man—through science and philosophy and introspection—has gained immense power yet that power has no reasonable outlet. Qutb sees the crisis of modernity in a more concrete sense. He believes that modernity is at fault in turning even Islamic societies into jahili societies, and that with the onset of modern thought—perhaps, its anthropomorphic concentration, or man worshipping man—has turned completely against the society that existed at the beginning of Islam’s conception.<sup>7</sup> While he asserts that there are no true Islamic states, Qutb stops short of claiming all Muslims have turned against their past—instead, opting to say that the faithful are in an eternal struggle with the Jahiliyyah one-on-one as well as state-to-state.

Western Civilization plays a prominent role in both analyses—Strauss sees the crisis of modernity as something wrong *with* Western Civilization, while Qutb sees Western Civilization *itself* as the problem. While Strauss uses the concepts of modernity to explain the digression *and* the destined eternity of the West, Qutb uses the West’s

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<sup>5</sup> Mark Blitz, “Leo Strauss’s Understanding of Modernity,” *Perspectives in Political Scienc*, ( Fall 2004), 216.

<sup>6</sup> Strauss, 98.

<sup>7</sup> Qutb, Ch. 7.

modernity to explain the digression of morality and Islamic society worldwide. It is worthwhile to note that Qutb rarely groups the “West,” and it is widely known that his studies in America sparked *Milestones* and its somewhat dogmatic rejection of Western society.

The divergent views of these two thinkers as to the actual crisis demands a separate consideration of the events which led to these crises—specifically, where and how they materialized. Strauss’s crisis of the West is seen as a “spiritual crisis,” where the West begins to doubt itself and the ideas that it was based upon.<sup>8</sup> Strauss sees Western Civilization as having two major influences: the ancient Greeks and the Bible. While these two influences compliment each other, such as on the issue of the importance of morality, they often diverge in process, reasoning, and outcome. Western Civilization, therefore, is from the beginning torn between two different yet intertwined sets of influences. Modern thought based in religion, as stated above, is put to an end by Nietzsche, and modern thought based on the classics is put to an end by the triumph of Science over philosophy.<sup>9</sup> Yet Western Civilization, specifically, is *based* on these concepts—secular yet moral, with a belief in the scientific as well as a reverence for the philosophic. Therefore, the West is left with nowhere to turn, and a doubt of modernity and progress leads to its own demise—even though the endeavors which led the West to this conclusion are part of the modern process. The crisis of modernity is that it has led to its own demise.

Qutb, on the other hand, saw the origin of *his* crisis of modernity as the transfer of “modern” ideas from the West into the Islamic societies across the Middle East. The

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<sup>8</sup> Nasser Behnegar, “The Intellectual Legacy of Leo Strauss,” *Annual Review of Political Science* (1998), 100.

<sup>9</sup> Strauss, 99.

jahili society, although the term is traditionally reserved for pre-Islamic Arabia and anyone outside of Islam during the time of Muhammad, is, according to Qutb, now exemplified in “the modern secular culture instilled by the West and by corrupt ‘Muslim’ rulers in Islamic societies.”<sup>10</sup> Therefore, while Strauss sees the crisis of modernity and the West as a crisis from within, Qutb sees modernity as an attack on Islamic society from without. Qutb, seeing a complete Islamic society as the only possibility that will bring *beneficial* progress to the West, sees Islam’s battle with Jahiliyyah as the only next possible frontier.<sup>11</sup>

While this leads to diverging views on strategy, both philosophers wish to look to the past—not to learn lessons and improve, which at least Strauss explicitly rejects, but to return to a way of life uncomplicated by the problems of modernity. However, one could argue that the complications of modernity are simply a continuation of the struggle that defines pre-modern times. Progress, a product of modernity and science, is therefore a product of the very struggle which Strauss maintains holds Western society together. On the part of Qutb, the problem of modernity is essentially the inverse incursion of Western practices and beliefs onto Islamic society. Would Qutb have, given Islam’s history as a passionate and innovative movement, argued against its incursion into pagan, Christian, and Jewish cultures starting with the 7<sup>th</sup> century? This is where Qutb’s dogma serves his purposes well: Islam as a religion versus a philosophy provides the opportunity for outright rejection of any such claim.

An interesting aspect of their analyses, thus, is the careful consideration given to divine law. In Strauss’s contrast of Jerusalem and Athens (akin to Nietzsche’s Judea and

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<sup>10</sup> Ronald L. Nettler, “Guidelines for the Islamic Community: Sayyid Qutb’s Political Interpretation of the Qur’an,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* (Jun. 1996).

<sup>11</sup> William Shepherd, “The Myth of Progress in the Writings of Sayyid Qutb,” *Religion* (Jul. 1997), 259.

Rome), the two influences on Western civilization, he painstakingly describes where they converge and where they diverge. Most importantly, of course, is that Greek and Biblical principles are in direct contrast to the concept of modernity.<sup>12</sup> Divine law is essential to both Greek and Biblical circles, which is why Strauss expounds on its influence in Western society. Both the Greeks and the authors of the Bible obey the divine law by extolling “justice,” a term Strauss uses synonymously with “morality.”<sup>13</sup> Neither the Greeks nor the Bible found morality to be satisfactory, and both have different solutions as to how to make it so. An important point made by Strauss is the aspect of divine law that makes it especially problematic: divine law, when issued by different divine beings, is often contradictory.<sup>14</sup> This brings us back to Qutb. How can one civilization, based on divine law from both its Greek and its Biblical origins, be so offensive to another, built on its own divine law? According to Qutb:

Man cannot change the practice of God in the laws prevailing in the universe. It is therefore desirable that he should also follow Islam in those aspects of his life in which he is given a choice and should make the Divine Law the arbiter in all matters of his life so that there may be harmony between a man and the rest of the universe.<sup>15</sup>

There is, unfortunately, no answer to this eternal question of which divine law prospers, or consideration of the fact that divine law is often the product of man. Qutb makes no excuses and considers nothing else; Islamic law is absolute and any consideration of alternatives would be against fundamental Muslim principle. If an essential aspect of modernity is anthropocentrism, then modernity is in direct violation of the Qur’an and ultimately *shirk*—seeing man as equal to God, the gravest sin that can be committed..

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<sup>12</sup> Strauss, 105.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 107.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 113.

<sup>15</sup> Qutb, Ch. 3.

Whereas Strauss leaves room for interpreting Western Society as somewhat unique in the sense that it is based solely on principles, Islamic society is based quite directly on the Qur'an and the Shari'a.<sup>16</sup> Qutb uses the Qur'an to pronounce a return to the time of the conception of the Muslim community, which was perfect in the sense that it lived its ideology—this is his central argument. Strauss, on the other hand, uses the Hebrew word *teshuva* (repentance) and Biblical references to simply *illustrate* the return of Western society to *its* premodern conception, not to advocate the return to pre-Western or Biblical times. It is important to understand Strauss's reasoning, as it is the basis for his assertion of a secular return to premodern Western civilization. "Repentance is return, meaning the return from the wrong way to the right one. This implies that we were once on the right way before we turned to the wrong way. Originally we were on the right way; deviation or sin or imperfection is not original. Man is originally at home in this father's house"—essentially, in every instance, there is a more perfect past to return to, as sin wouldn't exist without a sinless state of comparison.<sup>17</sup> Among the strongest argument for the idea of "returning" to a better way versus progressing toward one is in the argument against Reform Judaism: "Judaism is a concern with return; it is not a concern with progress. 'Return' can be expressed in terms of Biblical Hebrew; 'progress' cannot."<sup>18</sup> Here, Strauss makes the assertion that the idea of Reform Judaism is in itself against the grain of Judaism, since it understands itself *only* as progress. Are we indeed wiser than our ancestors? Strauss claims that this would assume that the beginning consisted of "radical imperfection;" this concept is refuted.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Behnegar, 99.

<sup>17</sup> Strauss, 87.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 88.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 89.



Strauss, then, uses these Biblical comparisons to assert that Western Civilization, the same way that those adhering to Reform Judaism deny the sinless qualities of the beginning by extolling progress, begins to tear itself apart in taking modernity and progress to their logical conclusions. Progress amounts in the seeking of knowledge, in the process of which everything is questioned. Eventually, the very *principles* that Western society relies on (self-evident truths and inalienable rights, for example) are eroded to the point that society begins to question its own existence.<sup>20</sup> Qutb uses the extreme departure from Islamic law that he has witnessed to call for a reformation and reassessment of the Islamic state, which he believes suffers from the ills of modernity brought on by the West. And hence comes the ultimate return to the premodern past.

Strauss, as mentioned above, illustrates his advocacy for a return to the past through Biblical language and examples. However, the brunt of his argument relies on the fact that returning to *the* roots of Western Civilization is impossible because its two core influences—Greek and Biblical—lie in conflict.<sup>21</sup> Strauss poses two solutions, one for each approach: as a philosopher, to return to the past would be to embark on a “free quest for the beginnings, for the first things, for the principles.”<sup>22</sup> As a theologian, would be to accept an omnipotent God and His divine law as *the* divine law, and obtain the knowledge of the beginning by those means. Both are problematic because they are conflicting, yet Strauss envisions this as the essence of survival of Western Civilization—the eternal conflict, from its very inception, between Greek influence and Biblical influence. As long as these forces are at work, Western society will be strong, but “the

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<sup>20</sup> Behnegar, 99.

<sup>21</sup> Strauss, 117.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 118.

right way of life” will always remain “questionable.”<sup>23</sup> In concluding the section that elaborates on philosophy and the Bible, Strauss asserts:

Philosophy and the Bible are the alternatives or the antagonists in the drama of the human soul. Each of the two antagonists claims to know or hold the truth, the decisive truth, the truth regarding the right way of life. But there can be only one truth: hence, conflict between these claims, and necessarily conflict among thinking beings; and that means inevitable argument. Each of these opponents has tried for millennia to refute the other.<sup>24</sup>

It seems as though, according to Strauss, the beginning is as the end: conflict, essential to the survival of Western society. His assertion at the end of his piece that philosophy rests on faith does little to resolve the problem whose beginning Western civilization should heed to. It is safe to say, however, that examining the principles at the heart of Western society—whether Biblical or philosophical—would do well to cure its ills.

Qutb’s return to the past is far more explicit and direct than that of Strauss. While Strauss must find a delicate balance between secularism and the Bible, Qutb leaves no room for the secular except in its complimentary nature to the Islamic way of life. His notion of returning to the past to cure the ills of Jahiliyyah, therefore, is much more pronounced, in line only with the Qur’an, the Shari’a, and the records of Islamic society at its conception.

The dual meaning of the jahili society—the “historical period” predating Islam and the contemporary meaning of those defying Islamic law—is representative of Qutb’s plan for a return to the past. Qutb recognizes no one, including self-proclaimed Islamic states, to be living in a true Islamic society—his criticism, “Islamic society is not one in which people invent their own version of Islam... and call it, for example, ‘progressive

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 123.

<sup>24</sup> Strauss, 123.

Islam”<sup>25</sup> is reminiscent of Strauss’s criticism of Reform Judaism. Therefore, his plan of action is akin to the actions of Muhammad in the 7<sup>th</sup> century:

It is...necessary that Islam’s theoretical foundation-belief materialize in the form of an organized and active group from the very beginning. It is necessary that this group separate itself from the jahili society, becoming independent and distinct from the active and organized jahili society whose aim is to block Islam. The center of this new group should be new leadership, the leadership which first came in the person of the Prophet. A [true Muslim] should cut off his relationship of loyalty from the jahili society, which he has forsaken.<sup>26</sup>

Qutb goes on, in Chapter 7, to expound on the various patterns of Islamic society—those that cannot be explained by “social theories alien to it.” Islamic society contains a certain amount of inflexible factors—the worship of God and the foundation that all human relationships stem from the worship of God, among others—and from there each Islamic society has the flexibility to develop in accordance with its natural factors.<sup>27</sup> From this point of view, science, philosophy, and progress—as long as they are in accordance with divine law—are accounted for. In fact, Qutb praises Islam in its consideration of “human progress” over all others; whereas the Western Civilization worships materialism and divides itself based on race or nationality, Islamic society unites on the basis of belief. Strauss might find that assertion problematic in that Western society, in his findings, unites based on universal principles—but, once again, in Qutb’s analysis, uniting under anything other than God is *shirk*. Most importantly, where Strauss runs into the problem of being able to find an acceptable “beginning,” Qutb has no difficulties: Islam itself sets

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<sup>25</sup> Qutb, Ch. 7.

<sup>26</sup> Qutb, Ch. 3

<sup>27</sup> Qutb, Ch. 7.

up the “milestones” and “establishes the path for those who wish to traverse it to the end,”<sup>28</sup> or follow in the steps of Muhammad and deny Jahiliyyah.

Qutb does not attempt to account for “progress” or “modernity” as actual forces that require deciphering. Progress, modernity, science—anything that time has brought the world—its worth and existence is relevant only in terms of Islam. Is it beneficial to Islam? Can it be considered one of the “boons” of being pious, as promised by God? Does it go against any Shari’a? The negative or positive qualities of any of these concepts are relative to Islam and Islam only, which makes them quite simple to discount. Qutb does not venture to explain the philosophical struggles that lead to specific phenomena, like that of modernity, only that it is adverse to Islam and its Shari’a. Qutb seems to be utilizing Strauss’s Biblical solution to the divine law problem quite efficiently: to accept the divine law of one deity is to claim all others as fraudulent.<sup>29</sup> There is something beautiful yet inherently non-philosophical about this approach—the rejection of a concept does not, fortunately for Qutb, require a discussion of its shortcomings on the technical level.

Despite their exceptionally different approaches, Sayyid Qutb and Leo Strauss agree on one essential aspect: modernity is a crisis affecting both of their societies, causing their deterioration and internal strife. Whether the society is in danger from its own progressive nature or the encroachment of others, the answer seems to be to regress into an earlier stage—both authors, with some nostalgia, assert this belief. Strauss’s analysis leaves much to be desired in the form of a conclusion, while Qutb lacks a serious scholarly examination of why Western, or jahili, society is now colonizing the faithful,

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<sup>28</sup> Qutb, Ch. 12.

<sup>29</sup> Strauss, 114.

instead of vice versa. Differences and shortcomings aside, they both agree: “the perfect end is the restoration of the perfect beginning” and the past is, unfortunately, “superior to the present.”<sup>30</sup>

Can the beginning, though, forgo the problems of modernity and provide society with a perfect way of life? Strauss rejects the historical view, but even his pre-modern Western society—the ideal that the West should revert to—lies on the principle of struggle. Whereas modernity focuses on a forward-moving struggle to attain a future that, by Strauss’s definition, may not necessarily be better, pre-modern Western civilization focuses on an inert struggle between philosophical forces. Therefore, a move to the past essentially accomplishes a move to stagnation, something that Strauss would doubtfully enforce. Qutb, who, on the other hand, does not reject a historical approach and in fact relies on it, has based his entire philosophy on the premise that reverting to the roots of Islam would in fact cure the woes of modernity. Even a topical examination of Islamic history would reveal a society quite reliant on progress, especially during the time of Muhammad when even the Qur’an was in a perpetual fluid state. Furthermore, the struggle between Islam and Jahiliyyah has shaped the history of the culture, so modernity proves nothing more than the next chapter in the book.

Little is left to the reader in terms of an actual viable solution; both Strauss and Qutb fail to make a case for why the struggle of the past is preferable to the struggle of progress.

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<sup>30</sup> Strauss, 87-88.

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