Chapter 6

The Political Philosopher in the Public Sphere

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In his novel Ravelstein (2000) Saul Bellow presents the slightly encoded biographical portrayal of his friend Allan Bloom who had become in 1987, with the publication of the best-selling book The Closing of the American Mind, a major protagonist in the American culture wars. According to Bellow’s sympathetic framing of Ravelstein, the original model for the fictional political philosopher had only inadvertently become a public intellectual. The financial exigencies of Bloom’s flamboyant lifestyle made him accept a challenge from Bellow to transform his lectures, papers, and discussions into an actual book, hoping for it to become a best-seller. The national (and international) success of the contentious text on the place of the metanarratives of Western meaning in American culture proved Bellow right. The eccentric political philosopher did not only appeal to the impressionable students at the University of Chicago. The public at large seemed eager to read Bloom’s indictment of the poverty of contemporary culture. As Bellow sums up Ravelstein/Bloom’s impact: “He had gone over the heads of the profs and the learned societies to speak directly to the great public. There are, after all, millions of people waiting for a sign. Many of them are university graduates.”

Ravelstein/Bloom’s students had turned, as Bellow describes them, “into historians, teachers, journalists, experts, civil servants, think tankers. Ravelstein had produced three or four generations of graduates. Moreover, his young men were mad for him. They didn’t limit themselves to his doctrines, his interpretations, “but imitated his manners and tried to walk and talk as he did—freely, wildly, pungently with a brilliancy as close to his as they could make it.”

Yet,
to the delight of Ravelstein/Bloom they also occupied positions of political power and let him partake of the power they had access to. Ravelstein/Bloom was close to power because his students called him up, wrote to him, talked with him. He was an intimate voyeur of the nation's power politics during the Reagan and Bush years. He died of AIDS in 1992, in the year the Democrats regained power with Clinton; the *roman a clefs* captures the last year of his life.

The circumstances of Ravelstein/Bloom’s death are important. As Bellow describes the vocation of the professor: “Bear in mind that Ravelstein was a teacher. He was not one of those conservatives who idolize the free market. He had views of his own on political and moral matters.” Unlike his famous biographer who revealed in occasional interviews and speeches how close he was to the politics of resentment that some of his fictional characters embraced in his later novels (e.g., *The Dean’s December*, 1982), Ravelstein/Bloom emerges as a complex figure who pursues philosophy and, at the same time, lives the life of pleasure he so vehemently attacked in his successful book. In the book he exposes the existential core of contemporary culture and its performers as being consumed by the promotion of desires. The philosopher Ravelstein/Bloom includes in his understanding of happiness the satisfaction of desires, and he dies like Michel Foucault in the careless pursuit of them. Bellow says of Ravelstein/Bloom that he “lived by his ideas. His knowledge was real, and he could document it, chapter and verse. He was here to give aid, to clarify and move, and to make certain if he could that the greatness of humankind would not entirely evaporate in bourgeois well being, et cetera. There was nothing of the average in Ravelstein’s life.”

The quasi-hedonist philosopher whose life colors Bellow’s novel was certainly not the person who stood at the center of Greek political philosophy. The intellectual and ethical substance that characterized the lives of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle is difficult to reconcile with the indulgences of Ravelstein/Bloom. Greek political philosophy became so formative in the Western world and its most renowned practitioners taught ethical detachment, not hedonistic self-gratification. However one interprets Plato’s *Symposium*, the speeches on *erōs* do not culminate in a praise of either homosexual or heterosexual desire. The human person is seen as a being who consists of body and consciousness. The body is neither privileged nor is it demonized as in the Augustinian tradition as the place of evil. Still, human desires are structured and transcended by consciousness. For Bellow’s Ravelstein/Bloom the *Symposium* expresses his self-understanding as being defined by the erotic longing for the “other half you had lost, as Aristophanes had said.” Bellow asks:

*Did he really share their view . . . that we were seeking . . . the other that is a part of oneself? Nothing could move him more than a genuine instance of this quest. Moreover, he was forever looking for signs of it in everyone he knew. Naturally his students were included. Odd, for a professor, to be think-

Ravelstein/Bloom used Plato’s *Symposium* to articulate his romantic longing for unity. As exhilarating as this misplaced concreteness and the promise of overcoming personal and social alienation may have been for his Chicago students, the communitarian conclusions they arrived at through leaps of the imaginary were certainly not those of the Greek political philosophers.

Though the philosophers discussed the optimal and the minimal conditions under which the good life was attainable in contemporary Greek city-states, they kept a personal distance to the routines of self-governance in the *polis*. To be certain, all three of them grudgingly praised the Athenian democracy of their time as the preferable polity. But the tension between the philosophers and the citizenry of the *polis* was never overcome. After all, Socrates was put on trial for questioning the cultural self-interpretation of Athens and subverting the uncritical self-confidence of its citizens; Plato never freed himself from the memory of his teacher’s death and immortalized the victim of a democratic *polis* trial as the central protagonist in almost all of his dialogues; and Aristotle remained an alien resident until his own death without ever trying to gain the rights of a citizen. The philosophers who established the investigation of the good life in society as a major branch of philosophy were dangerous, marginal, or no citizens at all. One could say that the discrepancies between Allan Bloom’s American teaching and life were continuing the tenuous relationship between philosophy and society since the beginning of political philosophy in the West. The men who launched the project of political philosophy did not understand their activity as providing the *polis* with an intellectual legitimation. They did not see themselves as paragons of social morality either. For the purpose of symbolic legitimation, the *polis* relied on a vast body of mythic tales, epic stories, and dramatic performances that could be called the collective public philosophy of Athens. Instead of creating this foundation of meaning, the philosophers were suspected of undermining it.

The American story of the political philosopher Allan Bloom, as depicted in Bellow’s novel *Ravelstein*, touches upon the complex relationship between political philosophy and Western or, especially, American society in the twentieth century. As Bellow suggests, through the medium of educating members of the future elite philosophers have an impact on the shape and substance of the public philosophy of the nation. Publishing a polemical book on cultural meaning that succeeds in becoming a bestseller, apparently helps to promote the search for the good life of society. Before talking about concrete configurations in contemporary Europe and the United States of America, a look at the American careers of three German-born political philosophers provides some
comparative texture to the Bloom story. The fact that one of them, Leo Strauss, was Bloom’s teacher adds a dimension to the story. Hannah Arendt and Eric Voegelin confirm the general thesis of a disconnect between political and public philosophy. Among the three only Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) ever reached a semblance of public recognition. Yet it was not her tenured teaching at a famous university that accomplished this—she never gained or wanted such a position—but the publication of books and essays that dealt with the totalitarian regimes of terror (The Origins of Totalitarianism, 1951, and Eichmann in Jerusalem, 1963) and political crises of the United States of America and other Western societies (On Violence, 1970; Civil Disobedience, 1970; Lying in Politics, 1971). None of these publications covered the substance of her major philosophical texts (The Human Condition, 1958, and The Life of the Mind, 1978). Her engagement with American themes was often perceived as being informed by a European misunderstanding. George Kateb summarized the complaints about Arendt’s lack of sensibility for the American founding and its consequences when he wrote: “her romantic republicanism does not bring out the democratic and brawling qualities of the American Revolution.” He concluded: “Heroic solidarity is not the aim of the actual social contract that is the American Constitution. In all these respects as well as others, the politics of constitutional representative democracy in America is submitted to an alien perspective that provokes but may not always illuminate.” Yet the most extraordinary illustration of Arendt’s American incomprehension was her inability to understand the depth of racism and the response of blacks to this historical syndrome. In a conversation with Robert Penn Warren, Ralph Ellison commented on Arendt’s “Reflections on Little Rock” (1959) and her failure to appreciate the meaning of black sacrifice. Ellison said:

Hannah Arendt’s failure to grasp the importance of this ideal among Southern Negroes caused her to fly away off into left field in her “Reflections on Little Rock” in which she charged Negro parents with exploiting their children during the struggle to integrate the schools. But she has absolutely no conception of what goes on in the minds of Negro parents when they send their kids through those lines of hostile people. Yet they are aware of a rite of initiation which such events actually constitute for the child, a confrontation of the terrors of social life with all the mysteries stripped away. And in the outlook of many of these parents... the child is expected to face the terror and contain his fear and anger precisely because he is a Negro American. Thus he’s required to master the inner tensions created by his racial situation, and if he gets hurt—then his is one more sacrifice. It is a harsh requirement, but if he fails this basic test, his life will be even harsher.10

Arendt’s inability to grasp the depth of racism in the United States was shared by most of the intellectual refugees from Nazi Germany. The fact that many of them were German or Austrian Jews did not make any difference. The American racism toward blacks was not questioned by Europeans, irrespective of their political or cultural affiliation. Gunnar Myrdal, in his famous study “The American Dilemma” noted that racism was actually also a European dilemma, even if Europeans refused to recognize it. Strauss and Voegelin were no exception, though, unlike Arendt, they never dared or, for that matter, cared to enter the public sphere as citizen philosophers to speak about issues like American racism. Arendt occasionally felt compelled to appear in the public sphere and comment on issues of general concern like school segregation in the South, the Vietnam War, student protest. Strauss and Voegelin abstained out of principle from such interventions. Yet whatever the difference of views concerning political commitment may have existed between the three, Hannah Arendt spoke virtually for all three of them when she rejected, in a discussion at a conference in 1972 that was dedicated to her work, the activist position for the philosopher: “the public mood may be something which I like, and the public mood may be something which I dislike, but I would not see it my particular task to inspire this mood when I like it, or to go on the barricades when I dislike it.” Arendt set her priorities straight when she continued: “The unwillingness of people who actually are thinking and are theorists to own up to this, and to believe that this (thinking) is worthwhile, and who believe instead that only commitment and engagement is worthwhile, is perhaps one of the reasons why this whole discipline is not always in such very good shape.”11 She was even more specific in her answer to the Marxist C. B. Macpherson who had asked: “Is Miss Arendt really saying that to be a political theorist and to be engaged are incompatible? Surely not.” Arendt’s response: “No, but one is correct in saying that thinking and acting are not the same, and to the extent that I wish to think I have to withdraw from the world.”12 Strauss and Voegelin lived this life of withdrawal from society even more so than Hannah Arendt who often violated her rule and ventured into the public sphere with provocative texts which caused her sometimes to be vilified. Strauss and Voegelin avoided these misunderstandings most of the time by writing only for those who were interested in the origin, substance, and memory of the great texts of civilizational meaning.

Unlike his student Allan Bloom, Leo Strauss (1899-1973) did not only avoid the public sphere, his books were written in such a style that they remained sealed texts for a larger audience. Academic critics charged him with being a conservative elitist, concealing his antidemocratic convictions behind intricate rules of interpretation for the “Great Books” of Western civilization. Kateb called these rules “precepts” that serve a “strategy”:

Read between the lines; expect to find that a writer says the opposite of what he believes; and sometimes expect to find the writer’s true sentiments expressed briefly and in an out-of-the-way region of the text. By strategy, I mean a characteristic way of interpretation, of ascribing meaning to complex
and disputed writings. I think that a case could be made for saying that Strauss's strategy of reading is not merely at the service of some local or temporary conservatism; rather—and far more important—it is at the service of an iner-
erate anti-democratic outlook, an authoritarian anti-democratic position.\textsuperscript{13}

Whatever truth there may be to Kateb's assertion about Strauss's hidden agenda, his assumption is that philosophy should be the handmaiden of democracy. It is introduced as an article of faith. Kateb does not only update the charges of the polis of Athens against the philosopher. Essentializing democracy as the only constitutional regime imaginable under the conditions of the modernity project, withdrawal from society becomes almost a crime against the enlightenment meaning of history. The tension between democratic Athens and the truth claims of the philosopher can even be less tolerated than in ancient times. History defines democracy as a superior political formation and, therefore, negates all other formations.

The irony, though, of Kateb's request of democracy is that modern democratic regimes are not democratic by ancient standards. All modern democratic regimes of the last 210 years have been designed against Athens. The ancient polis has been the great counter model for the moderns. The absence of lottery and rotation as equalizing features for the temporary selection of candidates for offices and the avoidance of a citizen assembly as a decision-making body illustrate the mediatized character of representative government.\textsuperscript{14} The circumstances surrounding the outcome of the 2000 American presidential election affirmed the non-democratic, i.e. representative, intentions of the founders. The institution of the Electoral College confirms the founders' mistrust of the popular vote for an office, which would have been in violation of the principles of Athenian democracy to begin with. In that respect, Kateb's attack on Strauss becomes meaningless. All modern politics from the radical left to the extreme right is, by the standards of ancient Greece, antidemocratic. Kateb's anti-democratic charge, however, has not so much to do with the constitutional regime but other features of Strauss's thinking. Eric Voegelin's take on the democracy request sheds some light on this question.

Eric Voegelin's (1901-1985) response to the democracy question does not deviate much from Strauss's attitude. Like Strauss he preferred the Anglo-American constitutional regime to all others.\textsuperscript{15} This personal preference, however, did not mean that he spent much time thinking and writing about it. The representative political system of the United States did not particularly interest him as an intellectual subject. As a refugee from Nazi Germany he fully recognized that the hospitality of American society had saved his life and made it possible for him to professionally pursue his intellectual interests in the American academy. He had published his first book in 1928 on the religious and philosophical narratives that constitute the grid of American meaning. But he never revisited the American story in a systematic way. The only time he came close to entering the public sphere in an Arendtian fashion was during his tenure in Germany when in 1964 he gave, at the university of Munich, a semester-long lecture series on "Hitler and the Germans." These lectures were meant to be published by Piper in Munich. Though he signed the contract, he never worked on the manuscript of the transcribed lectures. Whatever stopped him from meeting his contractual obligations, saved him from becoming at that time a citizen-philosopher in West Germany. Voegelin's lectures, which were finally published in 1999 in the United States as a volume of his Collected Works,\textsuperscript{16} would have catapulted him into the center of a debate on the Nazi past that had reached through the translation of Arendt's Eichmann book in 1964 new intensity.

Voegelin's lectures were, as one of the editors of the American edition rightly emphasizes, "scathing critiques of German intellectual and spiritual life before and after the Second World War. . . . Such a critique of the mentality and substance of an entire people was an enormous provocation and challenge to the contemporary attempts at 'mastering the past.'"\textsuperscript{17} In his lectures Voegelin challenged the evasive attitudes of the conservative elite during the Christian Democratic hegemony in West German society in the 1950s and 1960s. Because of his well-known anti-Marxist position he did not get much support from the ascending neo-Marxist elite in the cultural media that had received its intellectual education through the teachings and publications of the Frankfurt School. Voegelin had no close and lasting contacts to German conservatives or the Left. Being isolated in a society that wanted to forget, he knew the odds against him. His frequent invitations to U.S. universities, among them Notre Dame, Harvard, and Michigan, reminded him of the virtues of the life of theory outside the public sphere. In 1967, after delivering lectures at Emory University, he signed a contract for a research fellowship at Stanford's Hoover Institution and moved there for good in 1969. For the following sixteen years of his life, the American citizen Voegelin (since 1944) stayed out of the American (and German) public sphere.

Voegelin's temporary public temptation in 1964 was an aberration from a life committed to theory. He had no illusions about the possibility of philosophers having an impact on society. His attitude was influenced by his experiences in pre-Nazi Austria, a society in search of a constitutional order since it had lost its imperial standing after World War I. Voegelin wrote a book (1936) about that society and the authoritarian constitution it had given itself to protect its territorial boundaries and political integrity against the totalitarian threats from Germany and Italy.\textsuperscript{18} With the annexation of Austria in 1938 by Nazi Germany Voegelin's model of interpretation collapsed. He witnessed large-scale collaboration with the Nazis and fled to the United States. Before he left, he published an essay on the semireligious character of political movements in Germany and Italy and the widespread appeal the totalitarian tutelage seemed to hold for the majorities. The political philosopher Voegelin gained personal insight in the willingness of people to embrace with enthusiasm a political
Ersatzreligion. This will to self-negation among Italian, German, and Austrian majorities cast a shadow over the politics of agency. The political promise of the Enlightenment faded for Voegelin, as well as Arendt and Strauss, under the impact of those continental experiences. The American democratic creed appeared almost naive and historically untested for these European refugees. Voegelin had an additional theoretical reason why he preferred the bios theoretikos over the vita activa of praxis. His studies in the relationship between societal self-interpretation and the critical inquiry of the theorist convinced him, as he spelled out in The New Science of Politics, that

man does not wait for science to have his life explained to him, and when the theorist approaches social reality he finds the field pre-empted by what may be called the self-interpretation of society. Human society is not merely a fact, or an event... Though it has externality as one of its important components, it is as a whole a little world, a cosmos, illuminated with meaning from within by human beings who continuously create and bear it as the mode and condition of their self-realization.¹³

Society was not dependent on the intervention of the philosopher into its symbolic affairs. It managed quite successfully in providing itself with the meaning that distinguished it as a historical subject from equivalent entities. The philosopher was not essential for the existence of society.

According to Voegelin and his multicultivalizational studies of symbolic legitimation, societies have always and everywhere been self-sufficient in the production of meaning.²⁰ This symbolic self-sufficiency, however, did never preclude the critical participation of philosophers, writers, and artists in the social debates and their occasional creative interference. The playwrights of ancient Athens, for example, provided the polis with the dramatic structure through which the contested issues of the day could be represented. Peter Euben describes this communicative interaction between the polis and their writers:

As a political institution, tragedy was part of and helped to shape the democratization of Athenian life. Drama was an important means by which knowledge, values, and reasoning became elements of a common culture. As a form of public speech it opened public life to debate, discussion, and criticism while helping to qualify citizens to participate intelligently in them.²¹

Euben does not only recreate the ancient moment, he envisions that contemporary society will be jolted into a meaningful mode of existence by emulating the Greek posture. He launches a project of equivalent enactment when he states: “political theory like Greek tragedy may need to engage as much with popular culture as ‘elite’ culture, be as cognizant of bath room walls, old mattresses, telephone lines, and spray cans as it is of Sophocles, Plato, and Foucault.”²² Martha Nussbaum is more reserved about the environments, but no less exu-

berant about the possibilities of intervention when she writes about the playwrights and the philosophers:

Tragic poems, in virtue of their subject matter and their social function, are likely to confront and explore problems about human beings and luck that a philosophical text might be able to omit or avoid. Dealing, as they do, with the stories through which an entire culture has reflected about the situation of human beings and dealing, too, with the experiences of complex characters in these stories, they are unlikely to conceal from view the vulnerability of human lives to fortune, the mutability of our circumstances and our passions, the existence of conflicts among our commitment.²³

Like Euben, Nussbaum cherishes the pre-Platonic blurring of genres: “The whole idea of distinguishing between texts that seriously pursue a search for truth and another group of texts that exist primarily for entertainment would be foreign in this culture.”²⁴

Euben and Nussbaum’s celebration of the intellectual presence in the ancient public sphere is free of nostalgic overtones. Though they do not problematize the tension between the philosophers and the polis, at least they do not blame, in a Nietzschean way, the philosophers for the loss of ancient innocence. Still, Peter Euben’s introduction of the writer Thomas Pynchon and his novel The Crying of Lot 49 as a means of escaping the “entropy and death” of political theory, echoes Nietzsche’s move in The Birth of Tragedy (1872). Euben did not want “Greek tragedy and classical political theory” to be “consigned to academic disciplines that treat them with such reverence that all profanity and darkness is banished.”²⁵ Nietzsche dedicated his first book to Richard Wagner in the “conviction that art is the highest task and the true metaphysical activity of this life.”²⁶ He had hoped that Wagner’s operas would re-enchant the reality of being and contain the reach of scientific reason. Nietzsche wrote: “Only when the spirit of science has been carried to its limits and its claim to universal validity negated by the demonstration of these limits might one hope for a rebirth of tragedy.”²⁷ Nietzsche longed for the dreamtime of mythical visioning:

the waking day of a people who are stimulated by myth as the ancient Greeks were does indeed resemble dream more than it does the day of a thinker whose mind has been sobered by science. If, one day, any tree may speak as a nymph, or if a god can carry off virgins in the guise of a bull, if goddess Athene herself is suddenly seen riding on a beautiful chariot in the company of Pisistratus through the market-place of Athens...then anything is possible at anytime, as it is in dream.²⁸

In his edition of 1886 he retracted his hope for a recovery of the ancient mode through Wagner’s music. Wagner had become for the antinationalist Nietzsche
nothing but another propagandist for Bismarck's imperial Germany which he resented. That Wagner later became Hitler's favorite composer would have confirmed Nietzsche's worst fears. The permanent festival theatre in Bayreuth which opened in 1876 was already planned by Wagner as a "national shrine." This nationalization of Wagner's operas as public philosophy for, first, the Kaiser's and, then, Hitler's Germany illustrates the impossibility of returning to an earlier mode of truth mediation. It also shows how arbitrary the success is of any intentional symbolic intervention by philosophers, writers, artists, and composers in the production of meaning for modern society.

As illusive and arbitrary as the impact of intellectuals may be on the direction of any given society, they certainly can play an important role as participants in the meaning contests of civil society. Voegelin's comments about the "self-interpretation of society" creating a "whole little world" or a "cosmion" rejected the exclusive truth claims of intellectuals, but did not exclude them from the meaning process. A look at recent American, French, and German versions of this intellectual mediation of meaning in civil society, demonstrates the options and limits of engagement.

In the American case the battles on the culture front are mostly fought in academic departments, at academic conferences and in academic journals. The Kulturkampf over the canon of books which should be read by undergraduates in the required core courses of the general education curriculum of colleges and universities reached supervisory boards, legislatures, and the media. Yet the intensity of the academic debate about the metanarratives of Western civilization did never ignite the society as a whole. Bloom's attempt at launching a general debate did not succeed beyond the personal achievement of having published a best-seller. Public discussions in the 1990s over gay marriage, a national health plan, the impeachment of President Clinton, and, finally, the election results of November 2000 provoked greater heat. In these public contestations intellectuals did not play leading parts. The American republic was in no need of having to rely on philosophers, writers, or artists to sort out or meddle through the issues. The role of the political philosopher in the public sphere was marginal, if not irrelevant. The intellectual Russell Jacoby had already in 1987 bemoaned the absence of critical voices from the public sphere when he blamed academia for the "impoverishment of public culture." The colleges and universities had emasculated a whole generation of young intellectuals by providing them with jobs:

A great surprise of the last twenty-five years is both the appearance of New Left professors and their virtual disappearance. In the end it was not the New Left intellectuals who invaded the universities but the reverse: the academic idiom, concepts, and concerns occupied, and finally preoccupied, young left intellectuals.

Jacoby's longing for the intellectual with no institutional commitment was genuine nostalgia: "Thinking and dreaming require unregulated time; intellectuals perpetually lingering over coffee and drink threaten solid citizens by the effort—or the appearance of escaping the bondage of money and drudgery."

Jacoby's American intellectuals conform to the imagery of the life of the typical Parisian mandarin. Simone de Beauvoir's novel, Les Mandarins (1954), created the heroic environment par excellence. Paris under German occupation in World War II, during the liberation in August 1944, the postwar years and the Cold War provide the backdrop for the debates and confrontations between the French philosophers, writers, and artists about the role of the intellectual in French society. The importance for the production of French meaning was recognized by society, even if intellectuals did not behave in a remarkably different way than ordinary people under the Nazi occupation of France. Neither Albert Camus nor Jean-Paul Sartre, for example, refused to be published during the occupation; Camus' The Stranger appeared in 1942 and Sartre's Being and Nothingness in 1943. The intellectuals of the Parisian Left Bank were encouraged by the sympathetic German culture officers to publish. The German occupation ambassador, Otto Abetz, was "proud to be able to say that under German occupation France's scientific and intellectual activity was comparable to that of prewar years. No journalist or author was made to suffer for prewar anti-German opinions." Despite the less than heroic behavior of most French intellectuals, few became outright collaborators like Robert Brasillach and Pierre Drieu La Rochelle. Still, the central place of the intellectual in the public sphere was always expected in French society. The intellectual was the mediator of French meaning.

In the German case, the historical relationship between the intellectual class and the public sphere has changed dramatically with the founding of the Federal Republic of (West) Germany in 1949. The traditional role for members of the intellectual class was to stay away from public affairs, since they were perceived as tainting the mission of the pure spirit. West German politics encouraged the participation of writers like the Nobel prize winners Heinrich Böll and Günter Grass, though both of them encountered their share of hostile reactions to their interventions in public debate. However, the most intriguing change was demonstrated by the philosopher Jürgen Habermas. Habermas published in 1962 the influential text on the transformation of the public sphere, Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit. It took twenty-seven years until this book was translated into English. The year of its American release (1989) added to the impact of the book, since it seemed to articulate the civil society discourse that played such a prominent part in the downfall of state socialism in Eastern Europe, beginning with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Yet Habermas's book had nothing to do with the end of state socialism or the emergence of the civil society discourse in Eastern Europe. The book, translated as The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, was actually Habermas's most Marxist
text which Max Horkheimer, the grand old man of the Frankfurt School, refused to accept as the qualifying thesis for the candidate’s professorial career at the University of Frankfurt. Habermas was too Marxist for the old master and, therefore, had to leave Frankfurt. He got his Habilitation, the qualifying degree, in Marburg under the supervision of the Marxist political scientist Wolfgang Abendroth (to whom he dedicated the book) and was then invited by two Heideggerians, Karl Löwith and Hans-Georg Gadamer, to join them at the University of Heidelberg. Habermas’s intellectual career, however, is not only interesting because of the story connected with his first important book. He actually became the best-known citizen-philosopher in West Germany after his withdrawal from university life in 1971 (until 1983) under the impact of clashes with left activist student cohorts at the university in Frankfurt (to which he had returned in 1964).

Habermas recognized the Marxist limitations of his original concept when he elaborated in 1992 that the “political public sphere” is appropriate as the quintessential concept denoting all those conditions of communication under which there can come into being a discursive formation of opinion and will on the part of a public composed of the citizens of a state. This is why it is suitable as the fundamental concept of a theory of democracy whose intent is normative. In his role as citizen-philosopher Habermas went so far as to endorse a critical commitment to the political culture of, first, West Germany, and, then, somewhat reluctantly, to the reunited Germany. He appropriated the concept “Verfassungspatriotismus” (constitutional patriotism) from the political theorist Dolf Sternberger in order to symbolically connect his allegiance with the civil and human rights part of the constitution and the arrangement of institutions that guarantee them. Habermas’s transformation from a Marxist to a constitutional patriot represents the overcoming of the separation of the intellectual class from the German public sphere.

Habermas’s reconciliation with German society, his overcoming of the chasm between the intellectual class and political civil society, does not necessarily mean that the philosopher had suddenly gained influence on the production of meaning. Voegelin’s understanding of the configuration, his insistence on the importance of the symbolic self-interpretation of society probably comes closer to the historical situation. The contemporary German debate about a so-called “guiding culture” or “Leitkultur” illustrates this point. This debate centers on the question whether potential immigrants should embrace core features of German political culture, e.g. a fluency in German, a rudimentary understanding of German history, acceptance of the values of the constitution, including the separation of state and religion, women’s rights, and public education. Most of these demands would seem to be self-evident for any political society, and they certainly do not breach any principles of tolerance. None of these criteria in themselves would have raised complaints inside or outside of contemporary Germany if the major opposition party in Germany, the Christian Democrats, would not have included these demands in their proposals for a first German immigration law with comments that turned the criteria into code words for German cultural superiority. Still, the debate about “Leitkultur” and what it represents is an excellent illustration for the dynamics of debate in civil society. It was neither launched nor carried out by political philosophers. Some of them joined the debate as citizens, others watched this symbolic contest about the self-understanding of society from the sidelines. Whether the intervention of philosophers like Voegelin and Habermas makes any difference in such a public debate remains an open question. Habermas would answer in the affirmative, Voegelin in the negative. Hannah Arendt would possibly have followed Habermas, knowing that Voegelin’s abstention made more sense.

Richard Wolin has recently attacked Arendt in a review article on the volume of her correspondence with her husband as having been consumed by an “antipathy to liberalism.” He grants her the label of a “‘republican’ political thinker in the mold of Aristotle, Cicero, Tacitus, Machiavelli, and Burckhardt; but given the avowedly elitist biases of her thought, it could be a misnomer to invoke her legacy in support of the contemporary vogue for ‘deliberative democracy.’” Wolin’s critique illustrates the one-dimensional mind-set of the ideologue who cannot accept the existential tension political philosophers have consciously lived for the last 2,500 years in the West. For Wolin, John Locke epitomizes the best in Western political thought because he “provided the constitutional armature directly responsible for delegitimizing the monarchial despotism of the ancien régime.” It is safe to say that Strauss and Voegelin would have joined Arendt in her rejection of this bourgeois caricature of political philosophy. All three refused to invoke philosophy for the legitimation of a particular type of regime. Their flight from Nazi-Germany to the United States of America indicates their personal preference. This decision resembles the reluctant endorsement the Greek philosophers gave the polis of Athens by staying and dying there.

Notes
1. Saul Bellow, Ravelstein (New York: Viking 2000), 48
2. Bellow, Ravelstein, 58f.
5. Bellow, Ravelstein, 53
7. Bellow, Ravelstein, 24
8. Bellow, Ravelstein, 25


17. Voegelin, Hitler and the Germans, 2f.


20. See the five volumes of his Order and History (1956-1987).


27. Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy, 82.


29. Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy, 3-12.


32. Jacoby, The Last Intellectuals, 141.


34. See Olivier Todd, Albert Camus. A Life (New York: Knopf, 1997), 154f.


38. See Clemens Albrecht et al., Die Intellektuelle Gründung der Bundesrepublik, “Eine Wirkungsgeschichte der Frankfurter Schule” (Frankfurt and New York: Campus Verlag, 1999), 496.
