

Charles Butterworth

March 3, 2016

Gayle McKeen: This is Gayle McKeen here with Charles Butterworth, and we were just talking about the number of courses that he took with Strauss, which was significant. So tell me a bit about how you came to be in his classes and what drew you to his classes.

Charles Butterworth: I'll do that. Let me just—in case there is a record to be had: I went to Chicago in the fall of 1961, and in those days and perhaps for all the time Professor Strauss was at Chicago, the load was four courses a year. The way he did it was that in one semester, usually fall semester, he taught two courses: a seminar and a lecture course. And then winter—I'm sorry, not semester, quarters. In winter and in spring he taught a seminar, to the best of my knowledge, when I was at Chicago. I was there from 1961 to the spring of '64, and then went off and did what one might call field research in Egypt, since I do philosophy that has a kind of (in quotation marks) "tone." Then when I came back in '65, I guess then I probably audited rather than taking classes, because I would have had all my coursework done and would have passed my comps¹ and there would have been no reason to have courses on my transcript.

The way that I came to Chicago and to Leo Strauss was because at Michigan State, where I went as an undergraduate, I had come into contact with Robert Horowitz,² who was a remarkable teacher and was persuaded beyond all doubt that the only person one should study with for graduate study was Leo Strauss. I think I met Horowitz in my second year at Michigan State—and I didn't spend that much time at Michigan State; I spent two years complete and then at the end of the winter quarter of my third year I went to Brussels as a guide for the World's Fair. So I was gone spring quarter and then fall quarter of what would have been my last year. I came back to Michigan State in the winter quarter of my senior year, that would have been 1959, and finished up. I took a lot of courses with Horowitz. There was a number of other people at Michigan State not students of Strauss but aware of Strauss, and above all a man by the name of Stanley Idzerda,³ who was remarkable as a teacher. He also founded the Honors College. I was among the first people to be in this Honors College when I went there. He was just always a kind of gadfly to get students to do more and to do better.

After I graduated from Michigan State I went to France on a Fulbright Fellowship, and because I already had a good command of French, teachers there encouraged me to actually do something with my studies rather than just spend the year being a scholarly tourist. So I followed a Ph.D. program at the University of Bordeaux. Even though I was in philosophy, the person who was most helpful and directed me most during that time was a man by the name of François Bourricaud. Bourricaud, who was a very close friend

¹ Comprehensive exams.

² Robert Horowitz: see "People."

³ Stanley J. Idzerda (1920-2013), historian of France.

of Allan Bloom and more or less an age-contemporary, had studied with Strauss I think in '50, '51 when he came to the United States on a Rockefeller Fellowship. So Bourricaud was a sociologist, but even more than a sociologist, or in addition to being a sociologist, an ethnologist. And his ethnological area of concentration was Peru—Latin America, but especially Peru. (He's now dead.) His claim to fame as a scholar, I suppose, would fall into the two following categories: a) he was student of Raymond Aron, and b) what he did was to put into French, to translate into French Talcott Parsons' book on sociology.⁴ I forget now the title of it. Talcott Parsons, who was a remarkable sociologist, famous in the United States but infamous for his English prose, was then made understandable by Bourricaud's translation. But at any rate, once Bourricaud saw what I was interested in and we got to know each other and we talked about these things. He too was of the opinion that there is no place to go but Chicago and nobody to study with but Leo Strauss. In the meantime, I was interested in Jean-Jacques Rousseau and also in Montesquieu, but mainly in Rousseau, so he was of the opinion a) I should stay another year in France, and Fulbright was very gracious about that, so that came through, that happened; and b) that I shouldn't spend my time in Bordeaux but rather should go to Nancy and study with a man who'd written at the time published the most on Rousseau and Rousseau's political teaching, a man by the name of Robert Derathé. Those were two excellent years. I learned a great deal, probably was exposed to much more than I learned, but I enjoyed the contacts that I had with all of these people and managed to stay in touch with Bourricaud even after I left Bordeaux. And then because I decided that attractive as Nancy might be as a university town, Paris was a much better place to live; and so like Derathé, I took the train once a week from Paris to Nancy. We would meet on the train, but of course I was in second class and he was in first class, so we didn't sit together, but we would meet and chat in the corridors, and then of course have his courses one day and each of us in one fashion or another would come back to Paris.

This is fascinating because this is in the very late—1959 to 1961, and even then, the idea of what they call the “turbo prof” was very much in vogue. You lived in Paris and you commuted by a fast train to every conceivable part of France. Bourricaud didn't; Bourricaud lived in Bordeaux and stayed in Bordeaux until he actually received a job possibility at Paris, at what they now call Paris IV. So at any rate, I continued to see Bourricaud and he, sensing that I might be in need of talking to somebody from Chicago, arranged for me to meet Allan Bloom. So we met at a little café at Saint-Germain-des-Prés, and anybody who knows Bloom and his temperament will understand that I had no chance to put in a word edgewise, but [I] was certainly put on the right path. So that's how I came to Chicago.

Perhaps to put things as clearly as possible: when I came to Chicago, because I had this background in France and had a fairly good grasp of written and spoken French, there was another professor at the University who did contemporary political philosophy. Let's

⁴ Talcott Parsons (1902-1979) was on the faculty at Harvard University from 1927-1979. The book Butterworth refers to is likely *The Structure of Social Action* (1949) or *The Social System* (1951).

leave his name out, but I'll just say he's famous for the Black Box Theory.⁵ And this professor was looking for research assistants. Even though I was on fellowship at the time, he made me an overture of sorts that would have been very interesting, but I made the mistake of sitting in on a class of his before I accepted. The difference between his teaching and that of Leo Strauss was night and day, so I never pursued that opportunity.

GM: Did you regard it as a mistake?

CB: Not at all. This man was very nice but he was, how can I put it, much more full of himself than he was of students or . . . students. I did meet other people in Chicago who were remarkable and were very helpful in helping a student make his way, but this was not one of them. I think that simple experience of taking a seminar with this man and then taking seminars with very same . . . with Leo Strauss was what showed me the difference: a) Strauss was always prepared. It was clear from the moment that he came into the class that we were there to do important things, and we tried to. He was clearly better prepared than any of us, but things went along in a remarkable way. I think it was his grasp of the material that we were reading that allowed him to raise the most important questions, either for the author or for himself, which meant also for us, and to address those questions. What was remarkable especially from my perspective, having so to speak bathed in European approach to these things, was reading the text on its own and not reading it through the light of its historical antecedents. I wish I could say that Strauss won and that there's no such thing today, but that's certainly not the case. There's a great German term for what represents I think most academic scholarship: *Quellenforschung*, looking for the sources. When you read almost any journal article, that's what you see. Of course the counter to that is those who are called Straussians being accused of always looking for the teaching, one would say secret teaching or reading between the lines, but in essence what it really goes to is trying to figure out what the author said. Strauss made that very, very clear [in] presentations before the class, answers to questions from students and things like that.

GM: How did you get into Arabic political philosophy?

CB: At Strauss's instigation, in a way. I think it was towards the end of the first year that I was at Chicago. He made a remark in one of the questions after class had formally ended with a lot of questions from students. He happened to say in passing [that] one can't really understand the history of philosophy unless one understands the medieval Jewish and Arabic aspects of philosophy. So I went up to ask him about this. In a way that those familiar with the University of Chicago will understand, his response immediately: "I want to answer that Mr. Butterworth, but why don't you go across the street to the Oriental Institute and look up so-and-so." So-and-so happened to be Muhsin Mahdi.⁶ So I dutifully did that.

⁵ David Easton (1917-2014), professor of political science at the University of Chicago, 1947-77.

⁶ Muhsin Mahdi: See "People."

GM: Was Nabia Abbott still there at that time?

CB: Nabia Abbott was still there, yes. I went over and looked up Mahdi, and he said: It's a long path, and you can't really make any sense out of it unless you learn Arabic. By chance, there was an intensive Arabic program at Harvard that summer, and I could just squeak in the door. So that's how I started.

GM: That's remarkable!

CB: I really thought that this was going to be a couple of years learning Arabic and then going on and do the Continental philosophy that I had originally set out for myself. Instead a whole world opened up. I still find today in my research how deeply involved in that world Strauss was at one time, mainly through his attempts to understand Maimonides and Jewish philosophy, but also because he became fascinated with Alfarabi, and because of Alfarabi with Averroes. He read diligently in all these things, and of course I did have the chance to study with Mahdi and also with Nabia Abbott,⁷ who is a remarkable historian, unfortunately not that greatly heralded. Everybody who works in medieval Arabic/Islamic history knows of her name, but very few people know much else about her, and yet she did remarkable work. Above all, she taught Mahdi for sure, and tried to teach me how to be a good historian. She was excellent at the sources. What I'm finding today is to what an extent Mahdi, who was supposed to be studying business administration in Chicago but had somehow caught on to what was going on with Leo Strauss, how when he began to look at this material first for Ibn Khaldun and later for Alfarabi opened up a whole new world of culture. By going back to the sources, and clearly to the sources, he was able to show to those people who read him what a wealth of learning was going on in the ninth, tenth, eleventh, twelfth centuries—all the way up to the beginning of the fifteenth with Ibn Khaldun.

GM: So how involved was Strauss in shaping your dissertation topic?

CB: How involved?

GM: Yes.

CB: He was the co-director of the dissertation with Mahdi. I also had the notion that I should put a contemporary person on the committee, somebody interested in the Arab world, in order to enhance my possibilities of a job. So also Leonard Binder⁸ was on. I think it would be accurate to say that was a very bad decision, but I learned from Binder the things that one shouldn't do, as a young person. But to reply to the other issue: Strauss directed me to the best that I can tell the way he directed others. He read, he was willing to talk to you, but it wasn't a matter of going through the dissertation and marking

⁷ Nabia Abbott (1897-1981), scholar of Arabic writing and literature. She was professor at the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago from 1933 to 1963.

⁸ Leonard Binder (b. 1927), American political scientist and specialist in Middle Eastern politics and Islamic political thought.

chapters of the dissertation and marking it up and sending it back. And Mahdi didn't do too much of that either. He read everything I wrote, made comments, showed me where I was off base. For one reason or another, and it would be nice to explore this, I think, those teachers did not hold us by the hand. We had to either (this is mixing metaphors) sink or swim on our own. They gave us a goal to aim at, and if we got too far off base, indicated that we were off base. But otherwise they kept us talking about the major point. If I understand myself and my contemporaries correctly, we tend to take our students by the hand, for better or for worse. So Strauss was as involved as he could be, but mainly through my initiative.

GM: And you were the one that came up with the topic?

CB: I came up with the topic. I became interested in Averroes through a class I'd taken with Mahdi. This seemed to be a topic on Averroes' rhetoric that was not that well known. Mahdi and I decided that I really needed to go to the Arab world and learn to speak Arabic and to learn what was going on on a day-to-day basis, and fortunately there were fellowship possibilities there. I received two fellowships, one from the American Research Center in Egypt and the other one from Fulbright. For one reason or another, I decided that I should take the American Research Center fellowship and allow the Fulbright money—since I had already profited from Fulbright in France—allow it to be used for somebody else. That was a good enough decision, there was nothing wrong with it. My contacts with ARCE, American Research Center in Egypt, continued for many years. It was a very good place to be and as a matter of fact, it became the kind of academic center, even for Fulbright students who came there.

GM: Were there people there working on Averroes?

CB: There was nobody there working on Averroes, but there were people there working on any number of different things in the Arab world. Remarkably, we stayed in touch over the years. Once a small group to begin with, and there were learned societies that brought us together, and the fact of having spent time in a—I don't want to say difficult—in a strange land that doesn't lend itself easily to immediate assimilation creates a bond. It's not like living in Europe; it's a lot different. What Mahdi did, just by chance, it happened to be a sabbatical year for him and he came and spent essentially the first semester in Egypt in Cairo. He introduced me to different scholars and we decided that it would be a good idea for me to take classes at Ain Shams University, which is a kind of a suburb of Cairo, or it was in those days a suburb, with two very remarkable learned Egyptian scholars, 'Abd al-Rahman Badawi,⁹ who had done a lot of work on philosophy (he's now dead), and Abu Rida.¹⁰ His first name just simply escapes me, but hopefully it will come back. But Abu Rida was interested in Kalaam and dialectical theology. So that way I got a—'Abd al-Hadi was his first name: 'Abd al-Hadi Abu Rida. I got a remarkable exposure to what was going on in those days in the Arab world and also by being in the bath, so to speak, I learned how to speak Arabic. Other classes were

⁹ 'Abd al-Rahman Badawi (1917-2002), philosopher, poet, and prolific author.

¹⁰ Muhammad 'Abd al-Hadi Abu Rida (1909-1991), professor of Islamic philosophy.

handled in Arabic. I was a kind of exotic foreigner; fellow students couldn't quite figure out what I was doing there. I couldn't probably figure out what I was doing there, but—

[The interview was interrupted at this point]

GM: After an interruption, we're picking back up. I asked Professor Butterworth about a paper that he gave at a conference of Arab-American university graduates in which he justified why he was on the panel as a conservative by claiming Strauss—[that] he was a sort of grandchild of Leo Strauss.¹¹ So I asked him to elaborate on what that meant.

CB: I think there are two things that need to be said. The justification was the whole panel was a panel made up of people who call themselves conservatives. Parenthetically, probably few people who know me today would use that description for me, but we can let that one go. I was happy to use the description back in the '90's, by all means. My goal was—my attempt was to explain what we were doing to what would have been normally be a hostile audience—that is, an audience not wanting to hear from conservatives—and why a conservative argument was worthwhile. So it was in that context, and I, as an academic, as somebody coming in from the perspective of academia rather than from public policy, wanted to explain what my contribution would be on that level, and the argument I made was gauged in those terms. What is fascinating is that because of this new—I don't know what the correct word is—internet thing (there's got to be a better substantive) called Academia.edu which has contacted people and tried to get them to upload papers, I was prompted or I was asked by somebody asking about that paper to upload it and did so. There have been a number of hits since then, so—

GM: I received it in an email, a link to it.

CB: You received it as an email from them?

GM: Yes. It said that Charles Butterworth has uploaded a paper.

CB: I see. Okay, so they alert subscribers. All right, that explains maybe some things. I've not had any contact, anybody asking me about it, and quite honestly, there wasn't that much interchange then. That appeared in a journal called *Middle East Policy*, if I'm not mistaken. The editor, who is still the editor, Ann Joyce, was very sympathetic to what we were trying to do, encouraged the panel, and then published it. There are a few conservative voices or people with conservative leanings wanting to hear these things. So that's really what was going on.

GM: Am I correct in understanding you to say that you consider yourself a paleo-conservative?

¹¹ The paper was presented at a panel at the Annual Meeting of the Association of Arab American University Graduates (AAUG) in Washington, D.C., October 23, 1993. See "The Political Economy of Liberty in the Islamic Middle East," *Middle East Policy* 3:2 (1994): 109-24.

CB: Yes. I think if I understand things correctly, it's hard to be that today. The more I understand where I stand politically, I see that I've more or less left the conservative fold. I would like to think that I'm still asking important questions, but my goals are probably not those of my conservative fellows.

GM: You would consider Strauss a paleo-conservative as well?

CB: Yes. A traditionalist.

GM: Meaning what? How is that manifested?

CB: Really what is that culture that was brought up as part of an argument. Paleo is supposedly the opposite of neo, so that's what's going on. The man who organized that panel and who's been very, very influential in helping Strauss students forge their way in academia, Tony Sullivan, who was director of program at Earhart Foundation, is part of that. Now Tony was also a long-time supporter of Patrick Buchanan, a direction I cannot follow him in. But then he left that, and when Barack Obama came upon the scene, Sullivan volunteered for Obama. I don't know where he stands today. We haven't spoken recently about these things. So for some people politics changes. I have no more to say about that.

I really have nothing more to add except maybe to bring this to a conclusion by saying that it was an encounter [with Strauss] that was life changing. As I mentioned to you just a couple of turns ago in the conversation, here we are in 2016 revisiting Leo Strauss's essay on Alfarabi, how Alfarabi read Plato's *Laws*. You may or may not be aware, in July of last year my translation of Alfarabi's Summary of Plato's *Laws*, along with the Political Regime of Alfarabi was published by Cornell.¹² So there continues to be, at least among a few people, an abiding interest in Alfarabi. Without any doubt, in the '40's Leo Strauss did much to bring Alfarabi to the fore. Then it was later, through the excellent work of Muhsin Mahdi, that Strauss's impetus carried on. Again, if you look around at what's being published in France, in Germany, even in Italy and in Spain, there's a constant return to Alfarabi. Not always a return to the important questions, that's another story, but it is certainly a dim glimmer of thought that maybe this person Alfarabi has something to offer, and then a reluctant willingness to say: Yeah, and that fellow Leo Strauss did make sense. So the more it changes, the more it's the same thing.

GM: Let me just ask you one more question, since you took so many classes with him. Of course one of the authors he taught most was Plato; of course Aristotle. What did you think was so important about Plato for Strauss?

CB: I think that it's the same thing that's important for those of us who continue to read Plato. Plato has an unbridled desire to learn. Or, let's be fair to the author: Plato's

¹² Alfarabi, *The Political Writings*, trans. Charles E. Butterworth (Cornell University Press, 2015).

Socrates has an unbridled desire to learn. As much as that attracts a young person, it also attracts an older person. It's dangerous to say, but it should be said because it's true, that Leo Strauss also had a great fascination for Nietzsche. One can't help but be grabbed almost by the throat when one reads Nietzsche and forced to look at important questions. There's a way of engaging people. Alfarabi is a lot more subtle, but the same thing is there.

GM: That same radical challenge of status quo and accepted opinions?

CM: Yes, radical challenge of status quo, and of course the important question always is, as Strauss pointed out, reason and revelation. Both of them are kept alive at least by Plato and Alfarabi. For Plato of course there's no revelation, but the question of the gods; and for Alfarabi, there is revelation. It's kept alive, but what lies behind it is probed very, very thoroughly. Perhaps it's not kept alive by Nietzsche. So then the challenge is what has he seen that we haven't yet seen? I think that's for somebody else to speak about.

GM: Thank you so much.