

#### **4) Contour, Context and Contrast in the life of these worlds: A rejoinder**

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At the tenth national conference on political science and public administration held at the Prince of Songkhla University, Haad Yai and supported by the National Research Commission of Thailand on December 1-2, 2009, a young graduate student who attended the conference for the first time found the experience most frustrating. His presentation on the thought of a major twentieth century political philosopher was greeted with incomprehensible comments. He later found out the cause of this confusion and told me that: “They thought that I was not making sense and that Levi-Strauss never said such a thing. I then responded that I was not discussing Levi-Strauss – the anthropologist but Leo Strauss – the political philosopher!”

Not so strange I told him. For when I was studying social science epistemology with Michael J. Shapiro at the University of Hawaii three decades ago, in its first hour I thought the “Strauss” that Shapiro and others in that class were talking about sounded very different from the “Strauss” that I thought I knew. Of course, they were talking about Claude Levi-Strauss- the structural anthropologist who wrote such classics as *The Savage Mind* and not the political philosopher Leo Strauss who taught generations of students to unlock the esoteric code of classical political philosophy. Maybe this is what normally happens when different worlds collide in the minds of those who live in-between worlds.

When the organizer of this special panel on “Chaiwat Satha-Anand: Human Rights and Buddhist-Muslim Relations in Thailand”, Prof. Ray Scupin asked me to write a rejoinder to the three papers presented at the Ninth International Conference on Thai Studies at Northern Illinois University, DeKalb on April 4, 2005<sup>1</sup>, I decide to honor this request not only because I feel grateful that these distinguished scholars, working in different fields of anthropology, international studies and Islamic thoughts

from the Chinese University of Hong Kong, Lindenwood University in the US, and King's College London chose to spend their precious time writing something about my works, but also because the issues they raised are significant in understanding how different worlds collide, and how these collisions sometimes produce academic works, and how academic works are connected with the pertinent issues of a particular society, and oftentimes of the world.

This rejoinder therefore is an attempt to explore the ways in which different worlds collide to produce knowledge. Based on the papers by Dorairajoo, Scupin and Kersten, I would first discuss the contour of academic writings where scholarship means more than purely academic exercises but also as stated by Dorairajoo: "a means to advance human and humane society". Then in the global intellectual context that connects the local with the global where fusion of ideas and approaches take place, a different contour takes shape. Finally, the contour of thoughts that emerge could be better construed when contrasted with what had earlier transpired in a different time and place on similar issue – the connection between Islam and violence/nonviolence that primarily shapes the discussions in all these papers as well as my life works.

## **Contour**

Dorairajoo raises an important question at the end of her paper: "Can a scholar infused with a normative ethic write objectively? Does he retain his scholarly position and worth or does he denigrate into the position of a preacher and advocate while contributing little or nothing to the promotion of knowledge and scholarship?" (2010: 13).

There are at least two issues that need to be critically addressed: the relationship between normative ethics and objectivity, and the role of an academic as a scholar and as an advocate or a preacher. In the early twentieth century, the main issue that plagued social science was the separability between facts and values. A fundamental critique by political philosophy of the dominant political science of the period, both in the international arena (Storing 1962) and in Thailand (Sombat 1972: 1-24), was that the presence of values does not corrupt the course of analysis as mainstream political scientists point out but that they make them meaningful. When positivism reigned supreme in the academia, language was believed to be a tool capable of honestly and accurately "describing" reality. But with the "linguistic turn" in the early seventies (Rorty 1972/1992), language is no longer seen so innocently. In the late twentieth century, the question is not whether objectivity will be compromised because of normative ethics, but it is the existence of objectivity itself that has been called into question by different streams of epistemology (Bernstein 1978). The question is primarily about the relationship between humans, their world(s) and how they express them through the use of language that is no

longer seen as merely mirroring realities but producing them as well (Shapiro 1981). If the academia is seen as a world map, like the destiny befallen language after the middle of the last century, the lines used in this cartography have become increasingly blurred – those lines that once comfortably separate subjectivity from objectivity, masculinity from femininity, the sacred from the profane, the normal from the deviant, one country from another, and the researcher from his/her studies. In this world that has so remarkably changed into misty landscape, Dorairajoo's second question that of a line separating the researcher/scholar from the preacher becomes crucial.

Here it is important to ponder how social science research should be taught. Some teach researchers to be cool-headed. But I sometimes ask my students this question: can we get angry at the data? should we? When teaching violence and nonviolence in politics, I do not dissuade my students from sometimes getting angry at the world. For example, when we discuss issues such as violence against children in Thai society that has become increasingly frequent, more brutal and targeting younger and younger children – a child as young as less than two years old could be brutalized and/or raped (Chaiwat 2006), one should get angry not with the perpetrators but with how the world works that have made such atrocity possible, and oftentimes appears normal.

The question discussed here hinges upon two other minor yet significant points: how does one position oneself vis-à-vis the world? And why does one choose to study something and not something else? If it is a question of self understanding that influences the choices of research, then the question is this: if one understands oneself as a peace/nonviolence researcher, can he/she relate to issues such as violence against children without any feeling? At the epistemological level, is it possible that emotion in research could also sensitize researchers to issues that would have otherwise been ignored due to cultural acceptance? These may be problematic for an anthropologist or a political scientist, but less so for a peace/nonviolence researcher whose objective is not only to understand the world but also to find ways to lessen the pain and sufferings resulted from violence. The ways to lessen violence in the world for a peace researcher, and not a preacher, is that they must be based on knowledge from studies conducted with rigorous research that could withstand critical appraisal characteristic of academic tradition. In this sense, an academic can continue to subscribe to the highest standard of research but as an engaged scholar/academic who realizes the blurring reality of lines separating the worlds. In an intriguing way, the predicament facing an academic choosing to be a peace/nonviolence researcher resonates with a critical question once raised by Leo Strauss. In his conclusion of an epilogue he wrote in a book that critiques dominant political scientists of the day such as Herbert Simon, Arthur Bentley and Harold Lasswell, Strauss warns that political science cannot continue to “fiddle while Rome burns” (Storing 1962: 327). From a peace/nonviolence researcher's perspective, Strauss' warning could be read as a suggestion that facing the calamity of the world unfolding before their very

eyes, political scientists in particular and academics in general, cannot continue their lives as though nothing happens. While the question of what one should or should not do demands ethical assessment, what one can or cannot do depends on how each person's context is perceived and understood.

## Contexts

Confident that my political orientation is towards a more “liberal” wing within the Thai political scenario despite being influenced by the Straussian teaching, Scupin raised a question: How could a Straussian, normally perceived to be siding with the conservative persuasion, be connected with this liberal orientation in Thai politics? (Scupin 2010: 28)

It goes without saying that university education in Thai society has been mostly influenced by European and American teachings because generations after generations of Thai university lecturers were trained there. As a result, it is not totally unimaginable for a Thai university to be privileged with a Straussian political philosopher such as Sombat Chantornvong. Scupin's question could be answered by looking at differences among the Straussians and how Strauss' legacy is perceived, however.

It has increasingly become evident that there are profound differences between European and American scholars studying Strauss's works (Lilla 2004). Even within the American intellectual landscape, there are differences among the Straussians themselves. The “Straussian geography” could be based on these categories: East-coast Straussians as represented by the late Allan Bloom from the University of Chicago are said to be more philosophical; Midwest Straussians with Martin Diamond as its “founder” seem to be more positive towards modernity contrary to other Straussians who are more critical; and West-coast Straussians with the legendary Harry Jaffa as its most prominent representative have shown strong interests in the American power politics (Zuckert and Zuckert 2008: 228-259).

But I would argue that Scupin's important question rests on another form of collision between *not one*, but at least *two* sets of context shaping the lives of most academics anywhere – the intellectual and the socio-historical-political contexts. For example, though “Straussians” would share some commonalities to be classified as one, someone influenced by Allan Bloom or Walter Burns and those taught by Martin Diamond will be somewhat different in terms of their thinking on the subject of modernity. The same could be said about two Straussians taught by the same teacher, one working in Burma under a military-dictatorship and another in democratic Norway in early twenty-first century. As a result, another question could be raised: though it may be common to find an American Straussian who is critical of liberal democracy, but if the political context is authoritarian or dictatorial, what would be

the response of a political philosopher trained in the Straussian philosophical tradition? Is it possible to visualize him or her pursuing the ideals of liberal democracy as a form of critique of the existing regime? Perhaps only by being critical of the existing *polis*, could a political philosopher undertake his/her task with integrity. More importantly, it is the peculiar relationship between philosophy and society that needs to be seriously taken into consideration. Manfred Henningsen, who studied under the late Eric Voegelin – another great political philosopher of the twentieth century, who also taught me political philosophy at the University of Hawaii, writes:

(There is a) 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 (Henningsen 2002: 93).

Another interesting issue Scupin has raised is how the global intellectual context, in this case with its center firmly rooted in the European and American soils, helps shape the ways in which an intellectual on the other side of the globe pursue his/her interest in the shade of Southeast Asian reality. To deal with this question, one has to return to the issue of what is perhaps most common among Straussians anywhere.

Leo Strauss' philosophical themes include: dialogue between the ancients and the moderns, philosophy as a way of life, and the critique of historicism and positivism. But I would argue that the Straussians' strength lies in the way they study the classical texts of political philosophy and their interpretive methods. If studying Plato or Aristotle or Machiavelli in many non-English speaking Southeast Asian universities means reading *about* them from secondary/tertiary sources and flatly going through what was commonly regarded as "their" teachings, imagine what it would be like for young minds to have a chance to come face to face with a translated version of an ancient text - written by Plato, for example, for the first time in their lives and guided by the teacher who was trained in the arts of esoteric-exoteric writing/interpretation, who invited students to decipher the meanings of the text using a carefully crafted method with special attention to minute details that illuminate timeless messages coded in sometimes strangely ambiguous languages. Reading philosophy turns out not to be unlike exciting detective works – tracing clues necessary to understand existing political reality with new light shining from old sources.

A more difficult twist in trying to come to terms with Scupin's question is that this Straussian influence may not be the only intellectual tradition one has inherited when discussing the intellectual context of Southeast Asian intellectuals' journey to further their studies in Europe or the US. Embarking on graduate studies, many continue into areas quite different from what they were used to during their undergraduate lives. A young graduate student earlier trained by a Straussian could end up in academic territory inhabited by those influenced by Michel Foucault, Gandhi, Johan Galtung, or Eric Voegelin, among others. The result of such collision could often times be either a negation of the old in favor of the new, or vice versa. Yet, it could also result in a more difficult attempt to negotiate the minds through different intellectual traditions believing in their immense benefits for the complex world waiting to be understood. That this might be the case is due to many existential conditions which appear when different intellectual traditions collide. What this means is that a "Straussian" might later be influenced by no less a powerful thinker than someone such as Eric Voegelin (1901-1985)<sup>2</sup> – for example. As a result, the "Straussian" that emerges might be quite different philosophically and politically.

The association of Strauss's students with the conservative cause, and the Bush administration in particular, has become common knowledge and critically discussed (Norton 2004). It is said that the West coast Straussians, and the dominant figure among them is Harry Jaffa, "are prone to zealous partisanship in politics and the academy" (Norton 2004: 8). It was Jaffa, Sombat's teacher at Claremont, who helped craft Barry Goldwater's famous 1964 nomination acceptance speech with a most memorable quote: "Extremism in defense of liberty is no vice; moderation in pursuit of justice is no virtue" (Zuckert and Zuckert 2008: 197).

Together with Strauss', Voegelin's name have been used by the conservatives in the US as great public philosophers who recognized that the world was in a crisis, that modernity is its fundamental problem, and that the nature of this crisis needs to be construed without losing a strong sense of purpose. (McAllister 1996: 261) But unlike Strauss's student – Jaffa, Voegelin has always refused to be identified with the conservative cause. In a letter dated July 3, 1978 to a political scientist who had referred to him as a conservative, he wrote: "... I have not spent my life and done my work, in order to amuse and comfort American conservatives. It is, of course, quite legitimate to write an essay about the reception my work has found among Conservatives, but I am afraid a serious treatment of this subject would have to become a satire on the Conservatives." (quoted in Henningsen 2008: 9) In fact, when Gerhart Niemeyer, one of Voegelin's acquaintances who had translated his *Anamnesis* (1978) from German, and also written essays on Voegelin's works as "an intermediary and interpreter" (Henry 1997: 3-9), dropped Voegelin's name in the context of Barry Goldwater's campaign for president in 1964 for which he worked, Voegelin wrote him in October 1964 that: "Any move undertaken by whomever, apt to associate my work as a scholar with any political party, group or



movement whatsoever, but especially with Goldwater, conservatism or rightist groups, is made not only without my permission or tacit consent, but against my declared intention. I consider any such attempt at association as an attack on the intellectual integrity of my work” (quoted in Henningsen 2008: 10).

Standing in-between two streams of intellectual line of thinking, one emphasizes engaging with political reality in order to find ways to change it for the better while the other underscores the need to distance oneself in order to probe the structure of reality with a complex theory of consciousness and understand the human quest for meaning, the philosophical anthropology that emerges cannot but be tension-oriented with numerous possibilities including “a liberal Straussian” or “an engaged Voegelinian”. But if one believes that these streams of philosophical traditions which constitute one’s intellectual context share a common quest of political philosophy, then it is important to understand what philosophy means in Leo Strauss’ own words, which I believe Voegelin with his critique of gnosticism would share (Voegelin 1968). He writes:

Philosophy as such is nothing but genuine awareness of the problems, i.e., of the fundamental and comprehensive problems. It is impossible to think about these problems without becoming inclined toward a solution, toward one or another of the very typical solutions. Yet as long as there is no wisdom, the evidence of all solutions is necessarily smaller than the evidence of the problems, therefore the philosopher ceases to be a philosopher at the moment at which the ‘subjective certainty’ of a solution becomes stronger than his awareness of the problematic character of that solution (Strauss 1991: 196).

If one wishes to retain his/her philosophical orientation, it is important to approach political problems without the subjective certainty that renders the solution proposed unproblematic. Put another way, facing the fact that “Rome is burning”, political science needs to find ways to deal with the problem at hand. But for those who wish to retain their philosophic inclination, there is a need to search for and perhaps apply solutions to the problems without having complete faith in them. The philosophical temperament guiding political solutions therefore consists of being critical and humble at the same time. Critical in the sense that the solution is never proposed nor applied without a possibility of questioning it. Humility in the sense that there is always an awareness of the limitation due to inadequate wisdom to every human solution proposed. This is why “phronetic social science”, a heuristic device cautiously utilized in providing concrete examples and detailed narratives of how power works and with what consequences and how it might change, could be a way of conducting research to lessen human sufferings in the context of violence (Flyvbjerg 2001:140). When the notion of human limitation is genuinely recognized and certitude critically questioned, the most profound philosophical awareness where faith and political

philosophy meets re-emerges. This is a most important theme in the works of both Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin (Emberley and Cooper 1993).

## **Contrast**

In his attempt to trace my pursuit of nonviolence as an alternative back to my dissertation – *The Nonviolent Prince* (1981), Carool Kersten raises a very important question about the possibility of uniting the ethical with the pragmatic in the field of nonviolence. In so doing, Kersten believes that “instructive parallels and contrasts” (2010: 38) can be drawn from a comparative study of my works especially on Islam and nonviolence with that of Louis Massignon (1883-1962) whose unusual works on nonviolence connect Gandhi’s thought with politics in the Muslim world.

Kersten’s incredible effort itself needs to be put into perspective since he is trying to contrast my works with those that belong to one of the most influential European scholars on Islam in the twentieth century. In fact, Massignon’s life was incomparable by any standard for it extraordinarily included the excavation of an Iraqi fort, near execution on a Turkish steamer, a passionate homosexual love affair, military combat in the first world war and a refusal to hand over the keys to a Bordeaux town in the second. Religiously, he experienced a dramatic conversion from secularism to Catholicism when he was 24, ordination as a married Catholic priest at 66, and then arrested for political activities at the age of 75 (Gude 1997).

This fantastic individual worked for France’s imperial power, with genuine empathy with the Arabs and their faith. In fact, for him it was the empathy with Islam that is the very center of his theory of the monotheistic community (Said 1993: 318). Because of his imperial conviction, Massignon acted his part in partitioning the Arab world between France and Britain (Said 1993: 318). But that conviction was common among young European men who went for adventure in the Orient during that time. What distinguishes Massignon from many others was his later condemnation of the French imperial mission as an “abuse of hospitality” (Hourani 1995: 45), and that under Gandhi’s influence he engaged in nonviolent protest against French colonial rule in Madagascar, Morocco and Algeria (Hourani 1995: 127). Massignon saw in Gandhi especially his spiritual power and his principled-nonviolence, perhaps for the first time in the world, a man whose influence on people of other religions could yield great social results (Kersten 2010: 44).

But I would argue that Gandhi could also be seen as more than the apostle of principled nonviolence. In an important study by Gene Sharp, Gandhi’s qualities as a political strategist is carefully examined and underscored. Citing extensively and primarily Gandhi’s own writings, Sharp maintains that Gandhi neither demanded perfect nonviolence nor thought it possible. Instead, the Mahatma insisted that one should strive constantly towards the least imperfection and the least inconsistency (Sharp 1979: 276). Contrary to what many believe, Gandhi insisted that his important



contribution was to offer people a technique with which they could cope themselves with their social and political problems (Sharp 1979: 277).

In 1920, Gandhi wrote: "...being a practical man, I do not wait till India recognizes the practicability of the spiritual life in the political world. India considers herself to be powerless and paralysed before the machine-guns, the tanks and the aeroplanes of the English, and takes up non-cooperation out of her weakness. It must still serve the same purpose, namely, bring her delivery from the crushing weight of British injustice, if a sufficient number of people practise it"(Gandhi 1948: 3). Gandhi called this type of nonviolent action, "nonviolence as a policy" which can be given up upon due notice when it proves unsuccessful or ineffective. He wrote: "A policy may be changed, a creed cannot. But either is as good as the other whilst it is held"(Quoted in Sharp 1979: 278). It is important to understand that Gandhi's writing on nonviolence is reflective of his self-understanding. He categorically states that: "I am not a visionary. I claim to be a practical idealist" (Gandhi 1948: 2). In a peculiar way, Gandhi bridges the gulf between the ideal and the practical, and by extension - provides a unique way to connect the ethical with the practical in the realm of politics. Gandhi's solution points to the problematique of political science as envisioned by Aristotle and differently interpreted by Strauss and Voegelin, however.

According to Strauss, it was not Socrates or Plato but Aristotle who is truly the founder of political science. Aristotle's cosmology, as distinguished from Plato's is categorically separable from the quest of the best political order (Strauss 1978: 21). Voegelin, on the other hand, views Aristotle's *Politics* as the second part of a more comprehensive treatment of "political science" that also comprises the subject matters of *Nicomachean Ethics*. It is the science that explores the highest good (Voegelin 2000: 348). While ethics is the science of excellence, Voegelin suggests that politics is the science of the institutional means that are apt to produce the excellences in the citizens (Voegelin 2000: 352). Seen in this way, the political science that emerges is a kind of prudential science with a rich admixture of reflections on problems of ethics and philosophical anthropology (Voegelin 2000: 353).

The question is how does this type of prudential science respond to the problem of violence grounded primarily in religious justifications in the early twenty-first century?

## **Conclusion: from Contour to Contrast in Contexts**

In a letter to Dr. Victor Jacobson dated July 19, 1929, Louis Massignon proposed a research program on mediaeval Jewish-Arab thinking because he believed "that the only way of achieving serious reconciliation between Arab Muslims and the Jews in Palestine is to find a common area of cultural understanding" (Bourel 2004). Almost a century later, the act of terror on September 11, 2001 together with the global war

on terror that has been used as a response to it has plunged the world into a “cosmic war”. This is a kind of religious war in a polarized world between good and evil with God directly engaged on one side against the other, Reza Aslan maintains that those who fight this war are engaging in producing and defending their forms of identity. This cosmic war as war between identities has become a mere metaphysical struggle stripped of all political considerations. As a result, the only way to win this war is by refusing to fight one (Aslan 2009).

The question at this point is whether Massignon’s proposal of fostering cultural understanding or Aslan’s attempt to prevent this deadly conflict from becoming cosmic would be adequate in coming to terms with violence dressed in religious languages in the twenty-first century?

Consider the case of Mohammed Bouyeri. This young Moroccan Muslim man openly shot and killed Theo van Gogh, the prominent/notorious Dutch filmmaker who made the film *Submission*, on November 2, 2004 in a street in Amsterdam. He explained to the court that cutting off the heads of those who insult Allah and the Prophet was his obligation. He ended his speech in court by saying: “You can send all your psychologists and all your psychiatrists, and all your experts, but I’m telling you, you will never understand. You cannot understand. And I’m telling you, if I had the chance to be freed and the chance to repeat what I did on the second of November, *wallahi* (by Allah) I’m telling you, I would do exactly the same” (Buruma 2007: 190). This is perhaps a clear case of violence in early twenty-first century characterized by living the life in “a vacuum of meaning” and that such a life can be transformed by any movement or cause that promises some semblance of spiritual substance to fill existential emptiness. Killing in this case can then be seen as meaning created through violence for an otherwise empty life (Henningsen 2010).

Beyond fostering cultural understanding and refusing to allow the conflict to become cosmic war, there is a need to find radically innovative ways to transcend such deadly conflicts. Perhaps, such act of terror could be thought of as a form of political violence grounded in its own reasons yet producing destructive results to all concerned. These acts of terror perpetrated by some Muslims can be challenged with a possible transformation into a more productive/creative conflicts with Muslims’ nonviolent alternatives. It is also important to understand that this radical transformation is possible precisely because of the similarities, not differences, between terrorism used by some Muslims and “principled nonviolence” (Chaiwat 2006: 189-211).

When worlds collide, there are possibilities that the life in these worlds takes on innovative turn in an effort to negotiate the impending challenges. For a prudential science or a social science aspiring to be phronetic, it must confront the present global predicament of violence while retaining its philosophical task of critiquing the modern condition for its infatuation with naked pragmatism where any means possible are accepted in realizing political goals. Critique in its most philosophical sense means

both a criticism of existing conditions while reconstructing possible alternatives for continued engagement with the world. Facing the world of violence with all its complexities, nonviolence/nonkilling (Paige 2007) with all its creativity could be viable alternatives necessary to cope with the creative destruction unleashed by an empty quest for meaning.

Perhaps it is due to collision of different worlds with negotiated contours, complex contexts and fantastic contrast that has the potentials to produce lives of these worlds in pursuit of humane political societies where faith and philosophy, realism and hope, the practical and the ethical continue to co-exist in a world re-enchanted by the quest of knowledge.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I should also mention that there were two other academics who presented their papers at this panel in DeKalb: John Funston from the Australian National University on “Troubles in the Deep South: Importance of External Linkages” and Alexander Horstman from the Institut fur Ethnologie, University of Munster on “The Tablighi Jamaat in Thailand.”

<sup>2</sup> *Time* published a feature five-page article titled “Journalism and Joachim’s children” on Voegelin’s analysis of gnosticism in its March 9, 1953 issue which celebrated the magazine’s thirtieth year. The editors’ list of “convictions” and “birthday thesis” were primarily based on Voegelin’s analysis of gnosticism.

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