The decade of the 1930s was, for much of the civilized world, a dark and darkening period. Not only was the West in the grips of a Great Depression, but its self-confidence was at perhaps its lowest ebb. After all, European liberalism (and the individualism that was thought to be its most beautiful flower) was being abandoned for Marxism and fascism; science—which was not a little implicated in the deaths of millions in the Great War—was increasingly seen as both evil and as a merely parochial Western view; and political science, having once been viewed as the queen of the social sciences, was increasingly viewed as impotent, at least with regard to generating the most needful thing of all, values. Collectivism in politics, irrationalism for the spirit, and a tired recounting of a tradition of political thought that no longer could speak to us—such was the “spirit of the age” that, already a generation earlier, Spengler had dubbed the “Going-Under of the West.”

Toward the end of that decade, Leo Strauss, a then little-known German émigré scholar to America, published his first article on classical political philosophy, an interpretation of Xenophon’s *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians*. The immediate impression of scholarly abstractedness, unaware of the gathering storms just outside his study, seems redoubled when we look back from the vantage point of the later Strauss, who was anything but shy about openly invoking the “crisis of the West” and “the crisis of political philosophy”—usually in the opening paragraphs of his writings—as grounds for returning to the thought of classical antiquity. In this essay, however, he appears to be silent about the state of the world in which he lives and writes. Moreover, in selecting Xenophon’s *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians* as his subject, Strauss seems to be making every effort to evade, rather than to engage, the pressing issues of political philosophy as then understood. After all, the greatest thinkers of the period, Nietzsche and Heidegger, had pronounced Socratic philosophy to be the decisive wrong turn taken by mankind. And Xenophon was hardly viewed

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1 See, for example, Strauss (1953) 7–8.
as a Socratic worthy of *Dekonstruktion*: whatever his charms may be, the ability to grasp the intricacies of Socrates’ most subtle teaching was not thought to be among them. Even if, in some perverse way, that failing could be turned to Xenophon’s advantage—that is, if he could be shown to represent the poetic tradition of heroic overreaching that Socrates had undermined or destroyed—Strauss’ choice of the *Constitution* fails to capitalize on it: far from there being a commanding Cyrus in its pages, the Spartan citizens (and even, to a considerable extent, its rulers) we meet there prove to be more or less interchangeable and unheroic.

In contrast to the high drama associated with Nietzsche and Heidegger, then, Strauss’ first effort at a recovery of classical political philosophy seems modest to a fault. And yet, toward the end of his essay, Strauss does briefly indicate what it is about the contemporary political and philosophical situations that require overcoming if, indeed, a return to the classics is to be viable. First, in the midst of explaining the necessity and purpose of esoteric writing, Strauss observes that esoteric writing disappeared “at a rather recent date” and that “its reappearance is simultaneous with the reappearance of persecution” (535). This quiet allusion to the persecution then rearing its ugly head in Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany is Strauss’ sole reference to the contemporary situation. Second, Strauss proposes that insofar as “the restitution of a sound approach is bound up with the elimination of Rousseau’s influence,” the writings of “men like Xenophon” are precisely the “antidote” we need. Now, Strauss does not attempt to delineate the scope and meaning of the “influence of Rousseau.” But, as the topic of the essay leads us to recall, Rousseau was the most vocal and impassioned defender of “Sparta” in modern times. Nor was Rousseau merely engaged in historical romanticism. Rousseau’s defense of “Sparta” in the midst of the advance of enlightenment liberalism was closely connected to his promotion of the “citizen” who was fully dedicated to his fatherland over the “bourgeois individual” who combined the selfish exploitation of his fellow citizens with a craven deference to popular tastes and public opinion. Insofar, then, as Rousseau’s preference for Sparta had paved the way for both the Communist and the Fascist efforts to subordinate the individual to the state, or the we-species, or the *Volk*, it could not have been more timely to reexamine the original meaning of Sparta, or the allure of the “spirit of Sparta.”

What then is at issue in “The Spirit of Sparta or the Taste of Xenophon”? The title, at a glance, would seem to consist of two ideas linked by a conjunctive “or”: we need to recover something of the “taste of Xenophon” that ran toward

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2 All unspecified page references are to Strauss (1939).