FOREWORD: DIMENSIONS OF THE NEW DEBATE AROUND CARL SCHMITT

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"What did they live on," said Alice, who always took a great interest in questions of eating and drinking. "They lived on treacle," said the Dormouse, after thinking a moment or two. "They couldn't have done that, you know," Alice gently remarked. "They'd have been ill." "So they were," said the Dormouse, "very ill."

Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland

The philosopher's every attempt at directly influencing the tyrant is necessarily ineffectual.

Alexandre Kojève, Tyranny and Wisdom

Carl Schmitt was a prominent legal scholar in post–World War I Germany and one of the leading intellectuals during the Weimar period. Exceptionally active as a teacher and publicist, he probed the nature and sources of what he took to be the weakness of the modern liberal, parliamentary state, both in its embodiment in the Weimar constitution and more broadly as the modern form of political organization. He joined the Nazi Party in 1933 (in May, the same month as did Martin Heidegger) and published

several works, some of them anti-Semitic, in which he explicitly defended the policies of the regime. (He would later claim that he was trying to give his own understanding of Nazi ideas.) In 1936 he was severely criticized in articles published in Das Schwarze Korps, an official SS organ. Protected by Herman Göring, he remained in his post at the University of Berlin and continued teaching and writing but with a much reduced focus on contemporary domestic German matters. He was detained for an eighteen-month period after the war by Allied authorities, but never formally charged with crimes. He never resumed a university position. Fest-schriften were published on the occasions of his seventieth and eightieth birthdays; among the authors contributing were Julien Freund, Reinhart Koselleck, and Karlfried Gründer. He died in 1985 at the age of ninety-six.

From the beginning of his career, Schmitt was taken seriously on all parts of the political spectrum. The young Carl Friedrich (later to become a central author of the postwar German constitution, a Harvard professor, and president of the American Political Science Association) cited him approvingly, in 1930, on Article 48 of the Weimar constitution, which permitted commissarial dictatorship, a step that Schmitt had urged on Hindenberg. Indeed, all of the Frankfurt School


3 C. J. Friedrich, “Dictatorship in Germany?” Foreign Affairs 9, no. 1 (October 1930). It is worth noting that most of those who defend or apologize for Schmitt pull out a long list of those who have cited him favorably.

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(epecially Walter Benjamin) spoke highly of him, often after 1933. More recently, the Italian and French Left, as well as those associated with the radical journal Telos, have approvingly investigated his nonideological conception of the political. The European Right, as well as American conservatives of a Straussian persuasion, find in his work at least the beginnings of a theory of authority that might address the supposed failings of individualistic liberalism. Just as interestingly, a number of defenders of liberalism have found it necessary to single out Schmitt for attack, a need they

5 See Samuel Weber, “Taking Exception to Decision: Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt,” *diacritics* 22, nos. 3-4 (Fall-Winter 1992), pp. 5-18. A controversy around this and other issues was set off by Ellen Kennedy, “Carl Schmitt and the Frankfurt School,” *Telos* 71 (Spring 1987), pp. 37-66, and the responses from Martin Jay, Alfons Söllner, and Ulrich Preuss that follow in the same issue. Kennedy’s rejoinder appears in the Fall 1987 issue. It appears fairly obvious that Kennedy has successfully established the debt owed by most members of the Frankfurt School, including Habermas, to Schmitt.


do not feel with other critics of liberal parliamentarism who were members of the Nazi Party. By virtue of the range of those to whom he appeals and the depth of his political allegiance during the Nazi era, Schmitt comes close these days to being the Martin Heidegger of political theory.8

I cannot here do more than to call attention to these facts.9 If a definition of an important thinker is to have a manifold of supporters and detractors,10 the scholars I have cited clearly show Schmitt a thinker to be taken seriously. This is new. Entries in a standard reference work, *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Political Thought*, published in 1987, go from “Schiller, Friedrich” to “Schumpeter, Joseph.” No Carl Schmitt. Yet recent years have seen an explosion of work on Schmitt, in English-speaking countries as well as in Germany.11 A question thus accompanies the welcome sympathetic, Chantal Mouffe finds him “an adversary as rigorous as he is insightful,” in “Penser la démocratie moderne avec, et contre, Carl Schmitt,” *Revue française de science politique* 42, no. 1 (February 1992), p. 83. A computer search of the holdings of a research university library on Schmitt comes up with sixty-three journal articles in the last five years as well as thirty-six books published since 1980, most of them since 1990. By comparison, the search reveals 164 articles on Heidegger, and twenty-six on Hitler.

8Around the time they both joined the Nazi Party, Schmitt initiated contact with Heidegger by sending him a copy of *The Concept of the Political*. Heidegger responded warmly and indicated that he hoped Schmitt would assist him in “reconstituting the Law Faculty.” This letter appears on p. 132 of the *Telos* issue cited above. Schmitt, Heidegger, and Bäumler were the three most prominent German intellectuals to join the party.

9Accounts of it may be found in the excellent Gottfried, *Carl Schmitt*, chaps. 1 and 5; George Schwab, *The Challenge of the Exception*, 2d ed. (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), Conclusion; a right-wing appreciation of this can be found in Arnim Mohler, “Schmittistes de droite, Schmittistes de gauche, et Schmittistes établis,” *Nouvelle ecole* 44 (Spring 1987), pp. 29–66.


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reissuing of Schmitt’s *The Concept of the Political*. What is the significance of the rebirth of interest in Schmitt, a leading conservative jurist during the Weimar Republic, a scholar severely compromised by his participation in and support for the Nazi regime? Why is he now a focus for contention? What do we learn about our intellectual interests and problems in the attention now being paid to Carl Schmitt?

The intense and renewed attention to the work of Carl Schmitt, whether hostile or favorable, is due to the fact that he sits at the intersection of three central questions which any contemporary political theorist must consider. The first is the relation between liberalism and democracy. The second is the relation between politics and ethics. The third is the importance of what Schmitt called “enemies” for state legitimation and the implication of that importance for the relation between domestic and international politics. His understandings of these questions raise a final issue, which quietly frames all of the others; it has to do with the nature and consequence of the growing distance between the contemporary world and the events associated with the advent of Nazism. I want here to examine each of the questions, both substantively and in terms of their interest and challenge to the various schools of thought that take Schmitt seriously. I am going to call these schools “left,” “right,” and “liberal.” I do so with the recognition that these terms may be outmoded and even a source of confusion in our world.

The Relation between Liberalism and Democracy

Schmitt’s conception of the political stands in opposition to his conception of “political romanticism,” the subject of one of his early books. Political romanticism is characterized as a stance of occasionalist ironism, such that there is no last word on anything. Political romanticism is the doctrine of the autonomous, isolated,
and solitary individual, whose absolute stance toward himself gives
a world in which nothing is connecting to anything else. Political
romanticism is thus at the root of what Schmitt sees as the liberal
tendency to substitute perpetual discussion for the political. 12 On
the positive side, Schmitt’s conception of the political stands in
alliance with the subject of his subsequent book, Political Theology.
There he elaborates a conception of sovereignty as the making of
decisions which concern the exception. 13 The political is the arena
of authority rather than general law and requires decisions which
are singular, absolute and final. 14 Thus, as Schmitt notes in Political
Theology, the sovereign decision has the quality of being something
like a religious miracle: it has no references except the fact that it
is, to what Heidegger would have called its Dasein. (It should be
noted that the sovereign is not like God: there is no “Sovereign.”
Rather, sovereign acts have the quality of referring only to them-
selves, as moments of “existential intervention.”) 15

This is, for Schmitt, a given quality of “the political.” What
distresses him is that the historical conjunction of liberalism and
democracy has obscured this conception, such that we are in danger
of losing the experience of the political. In The Concept of the
Political Schmitt identifies this loss of the conception of the political
with the triumph of the modern notion of politics, dating loosely
from the French Revolution but already present in seventeenth-
century doctrines such as those of Cardinal Bellarmine, whose
theory of indirect powers Hobbes went to extended pains to attack
in chapter 41 of Leviathan. Politics thus involves, famously, friends

12 See The Concept of the Political (henceforth CP), below, p. 71.
temps modernes, no. 544 (November 1991), pp. 15–50. The publishing history of
Löwith’s text is given on page 15.
14 For a discussion of the influence of Kierkegaard on Schmitt, see Löwith,
ibid., pp. 19–21.
15 See Ellen Kennedy, “Carl Schmitt and the Frankfurt School: A Rejoin-
der,” Telos 73 (Fall 1987), pp. 105, 107.
and enemies, which means at least the centrality of those who are with you and those against whom you struggle. Fighting and the possibility of death are necessary for there to be the political.\textsuperscript{16}

From this standpoint, Schmitt came to the following conclusions about modern bourgeois politics. First, it is a system which rests on compromise; hence all of its solutions are in the end temporary, occasional, never decisive. Second, such arrangements can never resolve the claims of equality inherent in democracy. By the universalism implicit in its claims for equality, democracy challenges the legitimacy of the political order, as liberal legitimacy rests on discussion and the compromise of shifting majority rules. Third, liberalism will tend to undermine the possibility of the political in that it wishes to substitute procedure for struggle. Thus, last, legitimacy and legality cannot be the same; indeed, they stand in contradiction to each other.\textsuperscript{17}

The driving force behind this argument lies in its claim that politics cannot be made safe and that the attempt to make politics safe will result in the abandonment of the state to private interests and to “society.” The reality of an empirical referent for this claim was undeniable in the experience of Weimar. (It is worth remembering that Schmitt was among those who sought to strengthen the Weimar regime by trying to persuade Hindenburg to invoke the temporary dictatorial powers of article 48 against the extremes on the Right and the Left.)\textsuperscript{18}

There is here, however, a deeper claim, a claim that the political defines what it is to be a human being in the modern world and that those who would diminish the political diminish humanity. Schmitt lays this out as the “friend-enemy” distinction. What is important about this distinction is not so much the “who

\textsuperscript{16} CP 35.
\textsuperscript{17} I have loosely followed here the excellent analysis in Kennedy, \textit{Telos} 71, p. 42.
\textsuperscript{18} As Paul Piccone and G. L. Ulmen point out to Jeffrey Herf in “Reading and Misreading Schmitt,” \textit{Telos} 74 (Winter 1987–88), pp. 133–140.
is on my side” quality, but the claim that only by means of this distinction does the question of our willingness to take responsibility for our own lives arise. “Each participant is in a position to judge whether the adversary intends to negate his opponent’s way of life and therefore must be repulsed or fought in order to preserve one’s own form of existence.”19 It is this quality that attracts the nonliberal Left and the Right to Schmitt. It is precisely to deny that the stakes of politics should be so high that liberals resist Schmitt. If a liberal is a person who cannot take his own side in an argument, a liberal is also a person who, as Schmitt notes, thereby raising the stakes, if asked “‘Christ or Barabbas?’ [r]eorpor[s] with a proposal to adjourn or appoint a committee of investigation.”20

The Relation between Politics and Ethics

Schmitt claimed that liberalism’s reliance on procedure led to a depoliticization and dehumanization of the world. It was the daring of the claim for the political that drew Leo Strauss’s attention in the critique he wrote of The Concept of the Political in 1932. Schmitt had written: “The political adversaries of a clear political theory will . . . easily refute political phenomena and truths in the name of some autonomous discipline as amoral, uneconomical, unscientific and above all declare this—and this is politically relevant—a devilry worthy of being combated.”21 Schmitt’s claim was not just that the political was a separate realm of human activity, parallel to ethics, economics, science, and religion, but that inquiry

19 CP 27 (my italics).
21 CP 65–66.
into the political was an inquiry into the “order of human things,” where the important word is “human.”

To claim this was to claim that the possibility of dying for what one was was the final determining quality of the human. Schmitt’s existential Hobbesianism thus saw moral claims as implicitly denying the finality of death in favor of an abstract universalism in which human beings were not particularly involved in what they were. As Herbert Marcuse noted, “Carl Schmitt inquires into the reason for such sacrifice: ‘There is no rational end, no norm however correct, no program however exemplary, no social ideal however beautiful, and no legitimacy or legality that could justify men’s killing one another.’ What, then, remains as a possible justification? Only this: that there is a state of affairs that through its very existence and presence is exempt from all justification, i.e. an ‘existential,’ ‘ontological’ state of affairs,—justification by mere existence.”

It is this quality in Schmitt that is at the basis of the accusations of irrationalism and decisionism.

Two questions are at stake here. The first is whether it is possible to escape the hold of an ethical universalism; the second is that if it is possible, where then does one find oneself—what does it mean to go “beyond good and evil”? Schmitt clearly thought that he had given a positive answer to the first question: that people will only be responsible for what they are if the reality of death and conflict remain present. Such considerations transcend the

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22 Leo Strauss, Notes on Carl Schmitt, The Concept of the Political (henceforth NCP), below, par. 1.

23 Herbert Marcuse, Negations (Boston: Beacon, 1968), pp. 30–31. Martin Jay, quite unfairly, adduces this essay to claim against Ellen Kennedy that Marcuse was fundamentally hostile to Schmitt. See note 5 above.


25 CP 77. For an exploration of the relation of Schmitt to Max Weber on
ethical and place one—this is Schmitt’s answer to the second question—in the realm of nature. As Strauss notes: “Schmitt returns, contrary to liberalism, to its author, Hobbes, in order to strike at the root of liberalism in Hobbes’s express negation of the state of nature.”\(^{26}\)

However, as Strauss brilliantly shows, it is highly contestable that Schmitt actually has achieved what he believes himself to have accomplished. Strauss demonstrates that Schmitt remains concerned with the \textit{meaningfulness} of life—he is afraid that modernity will make life unmeaningful. He thus, as Strauss concludes, remains within the horizon of liberal moralist. “The affirmation of the political,” writes Strauss, “is ultimately nothing other than the affirmation of the moral.”\(^{27}\) Schmitt has, albeit unwillingly, moralized even his would-be amorality.

It is out of the scope of this foreword to indicate how Schmitt might have done otherwise. Strauss indicates that Schmitt has merely prepared the way for a radical critique of liberalism. However, Schmitt “is tying himself to his opponents’ view of morality instead of questioning the claim of humanitarian-pacifist morality to \textit{be} morals; he remains trapped in the view that he is attacking.”\(^{28}\) It is important to note that the nature of Strauss’s critique of Schmitt indicates that whatever his own critique of liberalism will be, it cannot be a simple reaffirmation of moral truths. Rather (and all too gnomically) “\textit{It is to understand Socrates},” as the highlighted words beginning the Introduction and chapters 3 and 4 of Strauss’s \textit{Natural Right and History} (a book overtly about liberalism and not Socrates) let us know.\(^{29}\) One should also note

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\(^{26}\) NCP, par. 14.

\(^{27}\) NCP, par. 27.

\(^{28}\) NCP, par. 30.

\(^{29}\) On these matters see the excellent book by Heinrich Meier, \textit{Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), esp. p. 86. The
here, as Heinrich Meier points out, that Schmitt never engaged in a full-fledged confrontation with Nietzsche.30

To some of those on the Left, Schmitt’s according of primacy to the political thus appears to open the door to a kind of postmod-ernism.31 Here, his insistence on the centrality of antagonistic rela-tions and his resistance to an abstract, not to say “thin,” understand-ing of agency fit in well with those who see liberalism as a historical event. To see liberalism as a historical event means that one understands it as the inheritor and bearer not only of rights and freedoms but also of structures of power and domination, of colonial and class exploitations, of the hatred of, rather than the opposition to, the Other.32

Such a response to Schmitt is, however, a highly selective choice of some elements of his doctrine. It tacitly introduces elements of democracy by pluralizing his notion of sovereignty and suggesting that the decision about the exception is a decision that each person can make. It is to claim that value-pluralism is not inherently undesirable.33 Against this one can insist that Schmitt,

30 See Meier, Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss, p. 65, n. 72. Wolin, Political Theory 20, no. 3, finds strongly Nietzschean elements in Schmitt. However, the elements that he finds are simply the same ones that he dislikes in Schmitt.
31 See Piccone and Ulmen, Telos 74, p. 138.
33 A fact also noted by Ellen Kennedy, in Telos 73, p. 66; and by Steven Lukes (in critique of Habermas), “Of Gods and Demons,” in David Held and John B. Thompson, Habermas: Critical Debates (London: Macmillan, 1982), also cited by Kennedy.
no matter what else he might be, was not a democrat. He did not conceive sovereignty as something each individual might have but rather as the exercise of power by the state. It is to this central and “tough” notion of sovereignty that conservatives respond. The question raised here is whether one can accept the formulations of *The Concept of the Political* as (in Schmitt’s words) “the starting point for objective discussion” and not emerge from them in the direction that Leo Strauss took.\(^3^4\) I leave unanswered and barely asked if there could be a Straussianism of the Left in America, an alliance of Berkeley and Chicago, as it were.\(^3^5\)

**Legitimation and Enemies**

In *The Concept of the Political*, Schmitt identifies as the “high points of politics” those moments in which “the enemy is, in concrete clarity, recognized as the enemy.” He suggests that this is true both theoretically and in practice.\(^3^6\) There are two aspects of this claim worthy of note. The first is the semi-Hegelian form it assumes. The concrete recognition of the other as enemy and the consequent establishment of one’s own identity sounds something like Hegel’s Master and Slave, especially if read through a Kojèvian lens. I suspect, in fact, that it is this aspect which led the SS journal *Das Schwarze Korps* to accuse Schmitt of neo-Hegelianism.\(^3^7\)

But only the form is Hegelian. There are two elements in Schmitt’s claim about enemies which are not Hegelian. First is a suggestion that unless one is clear about the fundamental nonratio-

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\(^3^4\) For some preliminary ideas see Gourevitch and Roth, “Introduction,” to Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny*, as well as the material from Strauss and Kojève in that book.

\(^3^5\) I find that Holmes, *Anatomy of Antiliberalism*, p. 88, raises and dismisses the question about Alasdair MacIntyre.

\(^3^6\) CP 67. See the discussion in Meier, *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss*, pp. 28 ff.

\(^3^7\) See Gottfried, *Carl Schmitt*, p. 31; Bendersky, *Carl Schmitt*, pp. 240 ff.
nality of politics, one will likely be overtaken by events. Following the passage about the “high points of politics,” Schmitt goes on to give examples of those who were clear about what was friend and enemy and those who were not. He cites as clear-headed some German opponents of Napoleon; Lenin in his condemnation of capitalism; and—most strikingly—Cromwell in his enmity toward Spain. He contrasts these men to “the doomed classes [who] romanticized the Russian peasant,” and to the “aristocratic society in France before the Revolution of 1789 [who] sentimentalized ‘man who is by nature good.’”

The implication here is that rationality—what is rational for a group to do to preserve itself as a group—is not only not universal but hard to know. We are not far here from Alasdair MacIntyre’s Whose Justice? Whose Rationality? The important aspect to Schmitt’s claim is that it is by facing the friend-enemy distinction that we (a “we”) will be able to be clear about what “we” are and what it is “rational” for “us” to do.

Schmitt insists in his discussion of the friend-enemy distinction on the public nature of the categories. It is not my enemy but our enemy; that is, “enemy” is a political concept. Here Schmitt enlists the public quality to politics in order to prevent a universalism which he thinks extremely dangerous. The argument goes like this. Resistance to or the refusal to accept the fact that one’s rational action has limitations determined by the quality of the identity of one’s group leads to two possible outcomes.

The first is that one assumes one shares with others universal qualities which must then “naturally” engender an ultimate convergence of interests attainable through negotiation and compro-

mise. Here events are most likely not only to prove one wrong but to destroy a group that acts on such a false belief. (One thinks of Marx’s caustic comments about the social-democrats in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*). This is the case with the “doomed” Russian classes and the “aristocratic society” of France.

The other, more dangerous possibility is that one will claim to speak in the name of universal humanity. In such a case, all those by whom one is opposed must perforce be seen as speaking against humanity and hence can only merit to be exterminated. Schmitt writes:

> Humanity as such and as a whole has no enemies. Everyone belongs to humanity . . . “Humanity” thus becomes an asymmetrical counter-concept. If he discriminates within humanity and thereby denies the quality of being human to a disturber or destroyer, then the negatively valued person becomes an unperson, and his life is no longer of the highest value: it becomes worthless and must be destroyed. Concepts such as “human being” thus contain the possibility of the deepest inequality and become thereby “asymmetrical.”

These words were written in 1976, but they were prepared for in the conclusion to *The Concept of the Political*: “The adversary is thus no longer called an enemy but a disturber of peace and is thereby designated to be an outlaw of humanity.” Schmitt wants here to remove from politics, especially international politics but also internal politics of an ideological kind, any possibility of justifying one’s action on the basis of a claim to universal moral principles. He does so because he fears that in such a framework all claims to good will recognize no limits to their reach. And, thus, this century will see “wars for the domination of the earth” (the phrase is Nietzsche’s in *Ecce Homo*), that is, wars to determine

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41 CP 79; cf CP 54 ff.
once and for all what is good for all, wars with no outcome except an end to politics and the elimination of all difference.

On a first level, the question that Schmitt poses here is whether liberalism can meet the challenges posed by international politics. Rousseau suggested that a country would be better off avoiding international politics; Hobbes made no attempt to extend the notion of sovereignty beyond state borders. Any answer to this question must deal with the fact that this century has seen not only the dramatic extension of countries claiming to adhere to universal values but also unprecedented attempts at local and universal genocide and the development of extremely aggressive regionalisms. For Schmitt these all went together. He thought there was no natural limit to what one might do to make the world safe for liberalism. The evidence is mixed.

On a second level, one must ask how a man who wrote with some eloquence about the dangers of universalism could have written what he wrote in support of Nazi policies. Three possible answers present themselves. The first is that he was morally blinded by ambition—that he would say what was necessary to attain and remain in prestigious posts. The second is that he did not understand what the Nazis were doing. The last is that he thought (or persuaded himself for some period of time) that the opponents of the regime were, in fact, enemies, who, in fact, posed a threat to the German identity. If the last is true, as I believe it to be, then what needs attention in Schmitt’s theory is not the

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42 Questions also raised by scholars like Hans Morgenthau, whose early work in Germany focused on the political (and not legal) quality of international relations; and Henry Kissinger, whose The Necessity for Choice (New York: Harper, 1961) and “The White Revolutionary: Reflections on Bismarck,” Daedalus 97, no. 3 (Summer 1968), pp. 888–924, while not mentioning Schmitt, clearly draw on him, as did some of Kissinger’s practice as a statesman. Note the parallel title in Wolin’s article, “Carl Schmitt, the Conservative Revolutionary.” See Alfons Söllner, “German Conservativism in America: Morgenthau’s Political Realism,” Telos 72 (Summer 1987), pp. 161–172.
attack on universalism but the overly simplistic notion of friend. There is a way in which Schmitt allowed his notion of enemy to generate his idea of friend.\(^43\)

**Schmitt and Nazism**

Does one’s judgment on Schmitt come down to the way one reads the facts of Schmitt’s adherence to the Nazi Party? Among his more sympathetic commentators there is a tendency to apologize and excuse. At least one response given by those who sympathize with Schmitt’s work will not do. This is the one repeated by the editors of *Telos* to Professor Jeffrey Herf: they rehearse answers like that of Paul Tillich, who responded to a student who objected to Heidegger on the grounds of his participation in the Nazi party by pointing out that Plato had after all served the tyrant Dionysos of Syracuse and we do not therefore refrain from reading him.\(^44\) While the quality of a person’s thought can in no way be reduced to a person’s actions, this is only because no action admits, in a moment, of only the meaning that time will give to it. One cannot simply draw a line between thought and life as if choices in life could be judged by criteria foreign to thought. Context matters, and not in a self-evident way.\(^45\) However, to ask the question of what Schmitt thought he was doing—his intentions—can also not be final. To understand everything is precisely *not* to excuse it. Purity of intentions matters for little and is often dangerous in politics.\(^46\)


\(^{44}\)Telos 74 (Winter 1987–88), p. 140.


\(^{46}\)This was the point of Max Weber’s essay “Politics as a Vocation.” See Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (New York: Viking, 1964), Epilogue.
It seems to me relatively clear that in most aspects of his thought Schmitt’s understanding of law and the world did not change throughout his life. This includes at least some aspects of his open anti-Semitism during the period 1933–36. Frightening in Schmitt’s case is the possibility that precisely what many find attractive in Schmitt must open, while not requiring them to take, the possibility of the route he took. I want briefly to suggest that this is a question we must face. Consider the possibilities.

The approach taken by Strauss and Meier consists in arguing that Schmitt, while attempting a radical critique of liberalism, remains within the liberal framework. (Such an accusation is similar to the one Heidegger makes about Nietzsche as attempting a radical critique of Western metaphysics while remaining in the metaphysical framework.) The implication therefore is that the choices Schmitt makes are not excluded by the liberal framework; that is, they take place in the terms allowed by that framework. The question here becomes the manner in which one can mitigate the dangerous possibilities inherent in liberalism, since for the historical present and apparent future no alternative is available. The commitment to liberalism is thus instrumental.

The position taken by the contributors to Telos as well as many of Schmitt’s other English-language defenders derives from the feeling that the liberal tradition no longer offers the intellectual resources to meet the challenges (especially those of technological domination and bureaucratized capitalism) of the modern world. Central to this pressing need for new theoretical resources is the collapse of Marxism as a viable first-world theoretical

stance. In this perspective, the preservation of (and, indeed, emphasis on) the forms of liberal institutions further undermines the values those institutions were originally supposed to promote. (This was the gist of Schmitt’s analysis also, of course.) Here the rejection of liberal structures is made in the name of (more or less) liberal values. But the only structure proposed is a kinder and gentler antagonistics than the existentially intense ones in Schmitt.

Liberals are horrified at Schmitt because he offends against one of the deepest premises of liberalism: politics is necessary but should not become too serious. As Robert Lane wrote a long time ago, liberal politics requires “a touch of anomie” about the public sphere. Most important, liberal politics take the form of claiming that politics should never be about identity and that to the degree that policy decisions affect what it means to be a person those decisions are divisive and dangerous. For liberals, rights are rights no matter how gained: they have little truck with the claim of what one might call Schmitt-leaning democrats that rights are not rights unless they are fought for and won, such that they become our rights.

Why these reactions now? There is no question but that the Left and the Right are, in their interest in Schmitt, responding to a perceived need to find other sources for political theorizing. Clearly there is a sense that the political categories imposed on us


50 Telos continues to look to the right. The Summer 1994 issue is devoted to the writings of Alain de Benoist, a leading theoretician of the New French Right. The progressive Left (Benjamin Barber, Charles Taylor) finds sustenance in de Maistre and Herder. The Right becomes ever more Nietzschean in its condemnation of liberal society.
by the relation to the monarchy of various parts of the 1791
French National Assembly have played their way out in the face
of modern technologically and rationalized industrial society.

There is also another reason, this one more generational. An
intellectual consequence of the experience with Nazism was
to effectively shrink, perhaps one might say homogenize, the lan-
guage and terms of political debate in the subsequent period. As
the Nazi experience fades from consciousness (at just over sixty
years of age, I am among the last to have been born during the
war and to have been taught by those with adult consciousness
during the war), so also possibilities excluded by the specter of
Auschwitz have returned. The revival of interest in Schmitt is
consequent, I believe, to this increasing distance from the 1930s. How
we manage the intellectual terrain that we are opening up is
our responsibility.

Notes on “The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations”

At a conference in Barcelona, Spain, in 1929, Carl Schmitt
gave a lecture on the topic of “The Age of Neutralizations and
Depoliticizations.” The lecture was published in 1930 and was
added to the edition of The Concept of the Political when it ap-
peared in 1932. Schmitt thus thought of it as part of his general
argument in that book; it is appropriate and important that it ap-
pear in this expanded edition.¹

As noted, a central theme to The Concept of the Political is
the “friend-foe” distinction, a distinction that serves as the quasi-
transcendental presupposition of the political. As the political is
for Schmitt the realm of that which is truly human,² his distress is
that the West is losing touch with that which gives life human
meaning. The argument he develops in the Barcelona lecture pre-

¹The fine translation is by John McCormick. I call attention to his fine in-
²NCP, par. 1.
sents the West as standing at the most recent of a series of “cen-
tral domains of thought.” “Central domains” play here pretty
much the same role for Schmitt as paradigms do for Thomas
Kuhn.3 Thus: “If a domain of thought becomes central, then the
problems of other domains are solved in terms of the central do-
 mains—they are considered secondary problems, whose solution
follows as a matter of course only if the problems of the central
domain are solved” (“The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliti-
cizations,” p. 86). In the modern West, Schmitt sees danger in the
increasing sense of the State as just “a huge industrial plant.”4 In-
creasingly this plant “runs by itself . . . [and] the decisionistic and
personalistic element in the concept of sovereignty is lost.”5
Schmitt’s task is to recover this element in contemporary times.

There have been five domains since the Renaissance, each
loosely identified with a century. As he lays it out in the Barcelona
lecture, the history of the last five hundred years in the West
shows a common structure: as the controlling force has changed,
so also have what counts as evidence, as well as what was the so-
cial and political elite. Thus in the sixteenth century the world
was structured around an explicitly theological understanding
with God and the scriptures as foundational certainties; this was
replaced in the next century by metaphysics and rational (“scien-
tific”) research and in the eighteenth by ethical humanism with its
central notions of duty and virtue. In the nineteenth century eco-
nomics comes to dominate (although Schmitt is seen as a man of
the Right he always took Marx completely seriously), and, finally,
in the twentieth century technicity is the ordering of the day. And
this is at the core of his claim that ours is an age of “neutraliza-

3Thomas H. Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (Chicago: Uni-
4Carl Schmitt, Political Theology (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,
5Ibid., p. 48.
tion and depoliticization": whereas all previous eras had leaders and decision makers—what he calls *clercs*—the era of technology and technological progress has no need of individual persons.6

Schmitt uses the French *clerc* and no doubt has in mind the 1927 book by Julien Benda, *La trahison des clercs* (*The Betrayal of the Intellectuals*).7 But whereas Benda had seen the *clercs* as turning away from spiritual and eternal values to temporal and political activity, Schmitt, tacitly opposing Benda, sees the *clerc* as the person who most centrally grasps and formulates the core of a particular central domain.8

The central quality of all transformations that have led to our present stage—technicity—is the “striving for a neutral domain.” For Europe, the attraction of a neutral domain is that it seems to provide a solution to the conflicts that had grown up out of quarrels over theology. It transformed the concepts elaborated by “centuries of theological reflection” into what are for Schmitt “merely private matters” (*AND*, 90). However, each stage of neutralization became, in Schmitt’s analysis, merely the next arena of struggle. Here it is important to see that what someone like John Rawls sees as one of the most important achievements of the West—religious toleration—is for Schmitt merely the prelude to another form of conflict.

6This periodization can also be found in shorter form in the 1934 preface to *Political Theology*, pp. 1–2. The stages are well discussed in Henning Ottmann, “Das Zeitalter der Neutralisierungen und EntTotalisierungen: Carl Schmitts Theorie der Neuzeit,” in Reinhard Mehring, ed. *Carl Schmitt: Der Begriff des Politischen; Ein Kooperativer Kommentar* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag., 2003), pp. 156–169. See the more extensive discussion in my foreword to *Political Theology*.


8Thus Jacob Taubes, one of the most insightful readers of Schmitt, can write about Schmitt in *The Political Theology of Paul* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 103: “He is a clerk, and he understands his position to be not to establish the law but to interpret the law.”
The central question now, therefore, is what conflicts will arise when the central domain is technology, which, “precisely because it serves all . . . is not neutral” (AND, 91). Here Schmitt finds himself in opposition to thinkers like Weber, Troeltsch, and Rathenau, whom he reads as succumbing to the “disenchantment of the world (Entzauberung der Welt).” If one follows them, Schmitt says, one will despair, for the world will appear only as what Weber called a “casing as hard as steel” with no way or even sight out. This leads to quietism, the most important danger now confronting Europe. This danger arises because it is Russia (i.e., the USSR) that has understood and seized technicity and made it its own in the new arena of conflict. Only in Russia does one now find a sense of a new “strong politics.”

Schmitt writes somewhat chillingly in The Concept of the Political that “if a people no longer possesses the energy or the will to maintain itself in the sphere of politics, the latter will not thereby vanish from the world. Only a weak people will disappear.” He thus closes his article with a truncated citation from Vergil’s Fourth Eclogue: “Ab integro nascitur ordo.” This full line is “Magnus ab integro saeclorum nascitur ordo,” which translates as “a great order of the ages is born from the renewal.” Schmitt’s abbreviated line means “an order is born from the renewal.” It is worth noting both that this line served as the origin for the motto on the Great Seal of the United States devised by Charles Thompson (an eminent Latinist), and that Vergil’s following line speaks of the coming of a new child (understood by medieval Christianity to be a prophecy of the coming of Christ). Schmitt ends his posthumously published Glossarium with “With each newly born child a new world is born. God willing, each

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9 Stahlhartes Gehäuse is Weber’s term (The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism [Penguin, 2002], p. 121) and has been usually misleadingly translated as “iron cage.”

10 The Concept of the Political, p. 53.
newly born child will be an aggressor!"\textsuperscript{11} The eloquent two closing paragraphs of Schmitt’s Barcelona article are in effect a call for the West to be equal to the need for this renewed conflict and to oppose the forces of Communism. One can only imagine what he might say in the present age as the United States calls, in more or less explicitly theological terms, for a conflict between the West and “radical Islam.”\textsuperscript{12}
