

Carl Schmitt: The Philosopher of Conflict

Now to [Heidegger's](#) friend and colleague Carl Schmitt, who had also attacked liberalism incessantly before the Nazi period, enthusiastically served the Nazi state, and then brooded after the defeat and spent decades developing and promulgating anti-libertarian thinking across the political spectrum.

Carl Schmitt was a German legal theorist whose book, *The Concept of the Political*, came to have an enormous influence on both the anti-liberal "left" and the anti-liberal "right." Schmitt posited that "the specific political distinction ... can be reduced to that between friend and enemy."¹

The most important part of Schmitt's attack on classical liberalism was his insistence that liberals were wrong about social harmony, wrong that exchange was a moral alternative to conquest, wrong that debate could replace combat, wrong that toleration could replace animosity, and wrong that a peaceful world was even possible.

For Schmitt, conflict was definitive of the political as such, and the political was essential to the human being. His influence on the political thought of the last century has been subtle, but his core idea came to permeate the thinking of both the left and the right. Schmitt's thorough and uncompromising rejection of classical liberalism has inspired both "left wing" and "right wing" attacks on toleration, the market economy, limited government, and peace.

Schmitt's influence has been significant on both anti-liberal poles of political thought, on both "left" and "right." The Marxist philosopher Slavoj Žižek recognized that both flavors of anti-liberal political thought embrace Schmitt's friend-enemy distinction and, as a "leftist," distinguishes the

right's focus on external enemies from the left's "unconditional primacy of the inherent antagonism as constitutive of the political":

it is deeply symptomatic that, instead of class struggle, the radical Right speaks of class (or sexual) warfare. The clearest indication of this Schmittian disavowal of the political is the primacy of external politics (relations between sovereign states) over internal politics (inner social antagonisms) on which he insists: is not the relationship to an external Other as the enemy a way of disavowing the internal struggle which traverses the social body? In contrast to Schmitt, a leftist position should insist on the unconditional primacy of the inherent antagonism as constitutive of the political.²

For such thinkers, whether of the left or the right, conflict – "inherent antagonism" – is constitutive of human life together.

The Left and Right Adoptions of Schmitt

In recent years, a "Carl Schmitt industry" of publications has emerged on the far left; the influential Marxist *Telos* journal and academic circle embraced Schmitt's theoretical foundation of politics for their anti-liberal program³ and his ideas play a central role in the influential, bitter, and violent attack on liberalism and peace, promoted as "the new Communist Manifesto," by Italian leftist writer Antonio Negri (who served prison time for his involvement in an array of murders in Italy) and the American literary theorist Michael Hardt.

Negri and Hardt's book *Empire*, a virtually unreadable screed published by Harvard University Press just before the 9/11 attacks on the Twin Towers in New York, prefigured those attacks with its call for attacks on "global capital," its definition of "the enemy" as "a specific regime of global

relations that we call Empire,"⁴ its chilling remarks about radical Islamist fundamentalism as just another form of postmodernism, and its calls for "the potential of the multitude to sabotage and destroy with its own productive force the parasitical order of postmodern command."⁵ (We can set aside the fact that hardly a sentence in the book is clear and understandable, for that is a standard feature of such works; George Orwell pointed out in his 1946 essay "Politics and the English language" that "when there is a gap between one's real and ones' declared aims, one turns as it were instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms, like a cuttlefish squirting out ink." ⁶)

"Schmitt's ideas and conceptions of politics are also entwined with neo-conservative thought, largely through the influence of Leo Strauss, who himself had a major influence on Schmitt, and Strauss's influential American followers, such as former White House adviser William Kristol, editor of the *Weekly Standard* and an architect of the Iraq War,⁷ and *New York Times* columnist David Brooks, who calls for "national greatness conservatism."⁸ In its less militant form, such conservatism amounts to a call for building huge monuments to national greatness.⁹ In its more warlike form it calls openly for war, as the neoconservatives were a primary driving force behind the invasion of Iraq. It would be, they thought, a truly heroic act of national greatness.

For Schmitt, "the enemy is not merely any competitor or just any partner of a conflict in general. He is also not the private adversary whom one hates. An enemy exists only when, at least potentially, one fighting collectivity of people confronts a similar collectivity."¹⁰ Indeed, "only in real combat is revealed the most extreme consequence of the political grouping of friend and enemy. From this most extreme possibility, human life derives its specifically political

tension.”¹¹

Schmitt's Rejection of Liberty

Liberal ideas, as articulated by such German-speaking liberals as Franz Oppenheimer and Joseph Schumpeter, were rejected root and branch. As Heinrich Meier has pointed out, in the second edition of the book – brought out in 1933 after Hitler had taken power – Schmitt was heavily influenced by Leo Strauss's comments and letters to make the book even more thoroughly anti-liberal.¹² (There is a certain irony in a Jewish intellectual's helpful and penetrating criticisms convincing and encouraging a German intellectual to become an avid Nazi and the “foremost Nazi jurist”¹³ of the Third Reich.) For Schmitt, free trade was not the peaceful alternative to war, but merely a cover for a more brutal form of exploitation: “The concept of humanity is an especially useful ideological instrument of imperialist expansion, and in its ethical-humanitarian form it is a specific vehicle of economic imperialism.”

For Schmitt, free trade was not the peaceful alternative to war, but merely a cover for a more brutal form of exploitation: “The concept of humanity is an especially useful ideological instrument of imperialist expansion, and in its ethical-humanitarian form it is a specific vehicle of economic imperialism.”¹⁴ Liberal conceptions of universal human rights are rejected because it would mean rejecting his distinction of friend and enemy:

Humanity is not a political concept, and no political entity or society, and no status, correspond to it. The eighteenth-century humanitarian concept of humanity was a polemical denial of the then-existing aristocratic-feudal system and the privileges accompanying it. Humanity according to natural law and liberal-individualistic doctrines is a universal, i.e., all-embracing, social ideal, a system of relations

*between individuals. This materializes only when the real possibility of war is precluded and every friend and enemy grouping becomes impossible. In this universal society, there would no longer be nations in the form of political entities, no class struggles, and no enemy groupings.*¹⁵

Schmitt understood liberalism well and rejected it totally. Not for him any appeals to universal human rights, or toleration, or freedom of speech, trade, and travel.

All liberal pathos turns against repression and lack of freedom. Every encroachment, every threat to individual freedom and private property and free competition, is called repression and is *eo ipso* evil. What this liberalism still admits of state, government, and politics is confined to securing the conditions for liberty and eliminating infringements on freedom.

We thus arrive at an entire system of demilitarized and depoliticized concepts.¹⁶

A “depoliticized” world meant also, for Schmitt (and for Strauss, Jünger, and others of that tradition), a world of unseriousness, of mere “entertainment,” when there were struggles, conflicts, wars, great causes pitting titanic forces against each other; all worthier, higher, and nobler than the life of entertainment, business, trade, family, and love, all of which were unserious compared to “the political.”

Schmitt, Heidegger, Jünger

Schmitt and Heidegger were collaborators in German academia in purging the universities of both Jews and what they considered “Jewish thought.” They took part in the restructuring of the law faculties and in the persecution of Jews.

Now there is an interesting issue here: Heidegger especially has been defended from the charge of anti-Semitism because he

rejected biology, but he did so in an internal debate among Nazis about the basis of their racial identity and exclusion. Heidegger rejected “biologism,” which he considered a terrible Anglo-Saxon idea capable of scientific disputation. Instead, he embraced a spiritual notion of race, which is inherently worse because it is less capable of being subject to rational disputation at all. The racism of figures such as Schmitt and Heidegger and their virulent anti-Semitism and Jew hatred are not rooted in biology, which could at least be disputed on empirical grounds, but in the unassailable realm, unreachable by critics, of spiritual racism.

Heidegger and Schmitt are clearly “dangerous” in the sense that their ideas and their legacy present very real dangers to liberty, to peace, and to prosperity. They are at the rotting root of virtually all forms of collectivism and of all philosophically rooted attacks on libertarian thought.

*This is an excerpt from a speech delivered at the 2016
FreedomFest.*

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[1] Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, Georg Schwab, trans. and ed. (1932; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 26.

[2] Slavoj Žižek, “Carl Schmitt in the Age of Post-Politics,” in *The Challenges of Carl Schmitt*, Chantal Mouff ed. (London: Verso, 1999), pp. 18-37, p. 29.

[3] Saul Anton, “Enemies: A Love Story,” *Lingua Franca*, May/June, 2000.

[4] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 45-46. The prefiguration of the attack by Osama bin-Laden’s suicide bombers on the Twin

Towers and the Pentagon may have been one reason the book sank below the waves shortly after the attacks. See Lorraine Adams, "A Global Theory Spins on an Altered Axis: 'Empire' Author Michael Hardt in Wake of Attacks," *Washington Post*, September 29, 2001. In their book, they speculate that "Perhaps the more capital extends its global networks of production and control, the more powerful any singular point of revolt can be. Simply by focusing their own powers, concentrating their energies in a tense and compact coil, these serpentine struggles strike directly at the highest articulations of imperial order." (p. 58) Hardt and Negri bemoan the growth of international trade and transnational non-state institutions, which they perceive as causing the "decline of any autonomous political sphere." That autonomous political sphere they identify with the nation-state, which does not mean for them a rejection of Schmitt's thesis, but a confirmation, for the confrontation of friend with enemy for them persists, but merely moved to "a supranational level." (pp. 307-309) The erratic and impulsive Marxist writer Slavoj Žižek has embraced Schmitt's approach to argue that even liberal democracy must embrace the "Schmittian" approach, that "our pluralistic and tolerant liberal democracies remain deeply Schmittian: they continue to rely on political *Einbildungskraft* [the transcendental power of imagination] to provide them with the appropriate figure to render visible the invisible Enemy." Far from suspending the binary logic Friend/Enemy, the fact that the Enemy is defined as the fundamentalist opponent of pluralistic tolerance merely adds a reflexive twist to it. Slavoj Žižek,

[5] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, pp. 65-66.

[6] George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," in *George Orwell, A Collection of Essays* (New York: Harcourt, 1981), (p. 167)

[7] Robert Kagan and William Kristol, "What to Do About Iraq," the *Weekly Standard*, January 21, 2002, available at <http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/>

[8] The relationship between Schmitt and Strauss has been discussed in a number of books, many of which dance around the question of Strauss's open admiration for Fascism. See Leo Strauss, "Notes on Carl Schmitt, The Concept of the Political," postscript to Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, pp. 97-122; Heinrich Meier, *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss: The Hidden Dialogue* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006) and C. Bradley Thompson, with Yaron Brook, *Neoconservatism: An Obituary for an Idea* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2010), esp. chapter 9, "Flirting with Fascism." There is also the matter of Strauss's letter of May 19, 1933 to Karl Löwith, written from Paris after the victory of the National Socialists in Germany. Strauss says it is horrible that "the entire German-Jewish intellectual proletariat is here" (in Paris) and that he would most prefer to return to Germany, but, he notes, Jews are no longer welcome in Germany. He added, though, that the fact that Germany, having turned to the far right, would not tolerate them (Löwith was also Jewish) absolutely nothing follows from that against the principles of the right ("daraus, dass das rechts-gewordene Deutschland uns nicht toleriert, folgt schlechterdings nichts gegen die rechten Prinzipien"). "To the contrary, only with the principles of the right, from fascist, authoritarian, imperial principles can one with decency ('mit Anstand') and without absurd and pathetic appeals to 'the imprescriptible rights of man,' fight against the whole miserable mess." He adds, and this is truly twisting the knife in the corpse of liberalism, that "There is no reason to contritely crawl back to the cross [this is a rich phrase in German that is not so easy to translate, especially as it refers to "the cross" and Strauss was a Jew, which is no doubt part of why he used it], and not even to the cross of liberalism, as long as the spark of true Roman ideas still glimmer somewhere in the world; and anyway, better the ghetto than any form of the cross." Letter of May 19, 1933, from Leo

Strauss to Karl Löwith, in Leo Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften, Band 3, Hobbes's politische Wissenschaft und zugehörige Schriften – Briefe*, second revised edition, ed. by Heinrich and Wiebke Meier (Stuttgart: Verlag J. B. Metzler), pp. 624-26. Strauss's defenders have gone to great pains to explain what he meant, but it seems likely, given his explicit quite positive invocation of 'Fascist, authoritarian, imperial principles" that he was referring to the Fascist state Mussolini had established in Rome, which was attempting to establish a "New Roman Empire" and was, at that time, a rival, not an ally, of Hitler and the National Socialists and also did not (again, at that time) incorporate anti-Semitism into the state ideology.

[9] David Brooks, "A Return to National Greatness: A Manifesto for a Lost Creed," the *Weekly Standard*, March 3, 1997. Moreover, in typically convoluted language, they call for the absolute and complete suppression of freedom of speech: "The real revolutionary practice refers to the level of production. Truth will not make us free, but taking control of the production of truth will. Mobility and hybridity are not liberatory, but taking control of the production of mobility and stasis, purities and mixtures is. The real truth commissions of Empire will be constituent assemblies of the multitude, social factories for the production of truth." (p. 156)

[10] Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, p. 28.

[11] Ibid, p. 35. "The state as the decisive political entity possesses an enormous power: the possibility of waging war and thereby publicly disposing of the lives of men. The *ius belli* contains such a disposition. It implies a double possibility: the right to demand from its own members the readiness to die and unhesitatingly to kill enemies." (p. 46)

[12] The 1933 edition endorsed National Socialism, included anti-Semitic statements, and incorporated changes suggested by

Strauss that made the book more totalitarian. Strauss had published a criticism of *The Concept of the Political* and argued that Schmitt had not rejected liberalism sufficiently, but was still trapped within categories established by liberalism, and he concluded that “We said Schmitt undertakes the critique of liberalism in a liberal world, and we meant thereby that his critique of liberalism occurs in the horizon of liberalism; his unliberal tendency is restrained by the still unvanquished ‘systematics of liberal thought.’ The critique introduced by Schmitt against liberalism can, therefore, be completed only if one succeeds in gaining a horizon beyond liberalism.” Leo Strauss, “Notes on *The Concept of the Political*,” reprinted in Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, pp. 97-122, p. 122. Those who have brushed off Schmitt’s services to the Third Reich as mere careerism or opportunism should read more of Schmitt’s suppressed writings, such as “Der Führer Schützt das Recht” (“The Leader Guards/Protects the Law”), published in the *Deutsche Juristen-Zeitung* (August 1, 1934) after Hitler’s execution of hundreds of opponents, and the chapter on Schmitt (“Hitler’s Lawmaker: Carl Schmitt”) in Yvonne Sherratt, *Hitler’s Philosophers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

[13] Ludwig von Mises, *Omnipotent Government: The Rise of the Total State and Total War* (1944; Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2011), p. 106, available at http://files.libertyfund.org/files/2399/Mises_OmnipotentGovt1579_LFeBk.pdf.

[14] Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, p. 54.

[15] Ibid, p. 55.

[16] Ibid, p. 71.

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