The Friend/Enemy Distinction and its Ethical Implications: A Critical Analysis of Carl Schmitt’s Political Thought

By: Alexandru Racu

Introduction

According to Carl Schmitt, the liberal worldview rests on a denial: the denial of the theologico-political problem. For Schmitt, this metaphysical denial is directly related to the liberal denial of several key concepts, such as the political (the friend/enemy distinction), the decision, and the exception, all three intrinsically connected to the notion of sovereignty. Schmitt indicates however that the de facto persistence of the abovementioned concepts in the liberal age displays the perennial relevance of the theologico-political problem, and the existence of an inescapable theologico-political matrix which predates and shapes modernity, revealing thus liberal thinking as “wishful thinking”. As argued by Schmitt, the liberal anti-theological polemic should not mislead one into ignoring the fact that liberalism itself is concomitantly theological and political. It rests on a deistic metaphysics which rejects God’s intervention through miracles in the natural order and subsequently, “denying the exception in every form”, rejects “the direct intervention of the sovereign in a valid legal order” (Political Theology, 36). But, as it will be argued in this paper, it appears that the liberal denial of the political cannot be reduced to an explanatory scheme of political reality, but conceals in fact a liberal political project, which overall, ultimately represents the guiding goal of political modernity. As stressed by Schmitt, the ultimate goal of liberal modernity and of its subsequent socialist and anarchist pseudomorphoses is the liquidation of political theology, and consequently the neutralization of all friend-enemy and therefore political relations, the creation of a world where there is no need for either priests or politicians, a world where “all moral and political decisions are paralyzed in a paradisiacal worldliness of immediate natural life and unproblematic correctness” (Ibid, 65).

In this paper I will try to analyze Schmitt’s critique of liberalism on two levels, the first level being explicit, and the second being rather implicit, perhaps even difficult to notice. To be more specific, I argue that Schmitt’s exposition of the liberal belief
(political theology can be liquidated) implicitly discloses the liberal wish (the liquidation of political theology and the neutralization of the political), which implicitly indicates the liberal fear (the return of political theology and with it the return of the political).

Accordingly, I argue that Schmitt also can be interpreted on two levels: first, what Schmitt says in *The Concept of the Political* (political theology cannot be liquidated thus the political cannot be dissolved), and second, what he wants (the persistence of political theology and implicitly of the political) which subsequently reveals his phobia (the liquidation of political theology and the disappearance of the political). I argue therefore together with Leo Strauss that Schmitt has a political project (he is not only an anti-constitutionalist as a jurist, as a legal scientist, but also an anti-liberal through his inner convictions), and that ultimately the justification of this project depends on an ethical grounding that unfortunately is lacking in his thought. In my opinion, the ethical justification of Schmitt’s project stands or falls with the possibility of a de-secularization of “the secularized theological concepts” which have become “the concepts of the modern theory of the state” (Ibid, 36), a de-autonomization and re-appropriation of the political by its original transcendent source, in short, a reversal of the logic of political modernity. Moreover, I argue that the impossibility of such a reverse process, an impossibility that ultimately points to Schmitt’s intrinsically modern limitations, explains the a-moral and a-rational decisionistic outcome of Schmitt’s thought, and may also explain to a certain extent his unfortunate concrete political decisions, namely, his support for Adolf Hitler.

**Liberalism and its contradictions**

As stressed by Leo Strauss, Schmitt's *The Concept of the Political*, written during the troubled days of the Weimar Republic, essentially points to a shift of historical paradigm. Liberalism and the Kantian dream of eternal peace are disenchanted by the return of the political. “The present situation”, wrote Strauss, is characterized by the fact that, “a process which has lasted for three centuries has 'drawn to its close' [...] The age of neutralizations and depoliticalizing is over. The movement in which the modern mind has attained to its maximum effectiveness, liberalism” (*Comments on Carl Schmitt’s Der Begriff des Politischen*, 85), is now discredited by the manifest reappearance of the political, which liberalism has so obstinately denied. Liberalism is disenchanted by
communism and the doctrine of class struggle, while communism in its turn is disenchanted by anarchism and its attack on all forms of state or non-state institutions and hierarchies, in a series of more and more radical anti-political utopias that follow the inner logic of political modernity. Yet, Schmitt underlines the fact that paradoxically, the modern attempt to dissolve the political, and to eliminate political violence in fact radicalizes the political. This turns the conventional *inimicus* into *hostis*, the absolute enemy, consequently turning conventional warfare into total war. The enemy of a pacifist is not just a simple enemy but also the enemy of peace, the enemy of humanity, the incarnation of radical evil; a fact that makes completely justifiable its merciless destruction. Thus, Schmitt argues that it is precisely the pacifist and humanitarian ideals of the moderns that are responsible for a return from the moderate logic of the Westfalian international order, to the maximalist logic of the crusades. In short, combatants are expected to be much more ruthless when they fight not for a piece of land but for the salvation of all, peace, humanity, universal brotherhood, etc.

Schmitt fully agrees with Marx's position that liberalism is marked by a fundamental hypocrisy. The bourgeois liberal conceals the political as it conceals the class conflict which defines the market, his favorite habitat, officially portrayed by him as a non-political, neutral area that peacefully generates universal prosperity. For Schmitt, the bourgeois liberal follows his egoistic interest alone as he oscillates between his two enemies in an attempt to fool them both. For while “the hatred of monarchy and aristocracy [drove him] leftward; the fear of being dispossessed of his property, which was threatened by radical democracy and socialism, drove him in turn toward the right, to a powerful monarchy whose military could protect him” (*Political Theology*, 61).

Schmitt underlines the fact that this bourgeois attitude was acknowledged by radicals at both ends of the political spectrum, and moreover, a Catholic reactionary like Juan Donoso Cortés (one of Schmitt’s major influences) was able to respect the communists, and especially the anarchists for their consistency, while feeling nothing but disdain for the tepid liberals. For Cortés, “the insecurity and immaturity of the liberal bourgeoisie” was recognizable everywhere:

*Its liberal constitutionalism attempted to paralyze the king through parliament but permitted him to remain on the throne, an inconsistency committed by deism when
it excluded God from the world but held onto His existence. Although the liberal bourgeoisie wanted a god, its god could not become active; it wanted a monarch, but he had to be powerless; it demanded freedom and equality but limited voting rights to the propertied class...it wanted neither the sovereignty of the king nor that of the people. What did it actually want? (Ibid, 59-60).

Schmitt argues that ultimately, the bourgeois liberal:

> Does not want to leave the apolitical riskless private sphere. He rests in the possession of his private property, and under the justification of his possessive individualism he acts as an individual against the totality. He is a man who finds his compensation for his political nullity in the fruits of freedom and enrichment and above all in the total security of its use. Consequently he wants to be spared bravery and exempted from the danger of violent death. (*The Concept of the Political*, 62-3).

According to Schmitt, “there is no liberal politics [but] only a liberal critique of politics” (Ibid, 71). Referring again to Cortés, Schmitt underlines the fact that liberalism was unable to decide in the final bloody battle between authority and anarchy/Catholicism and anarchism/God and Satan, the Armageddon of political modernity towards which the latter was inexorably heading, as Cortés believed, but instead wanted “to begin a discussion”. Defined by Cortés as “a discussing class (*una clasa discutidora*)”, the bourgeoisie wishes to “dissolve the metaphysical truth in a discussion”. Schmitt identifies this liberal mindset as the transposition from economics into politics of Adam Smith's concept of “the invisible hand”. But, as Schmitt points out, for authors such as Joseph de Maistre and Cortés:

> “a systematic and metaphysical compromise was inconceivable. To suspend the decision at the crucial moment by denying there was at all something to be decided upon must have appeared to them to be a strange pantheistic confusion. Liberalism, with its contradictions and compromises, existed for Donoso Cortés only in that short interim period in which it was possible to answer the question 'Christ or Barabbas?' with a proposal to adjourn or appoint a commission of investigation” (*Political Theology*, 59-63).

**The political: an unsurpassable human category**

For Schmitt, behind the veil of parliamentary debate, politics always appears as the realm of decision. The politician is he who decides on the friend-enemy relation in the same way as “sovereign is he who decides on the exception” (Ibid, 5). Moreover, for Schmitt, human existence itself is political existence and due to this fact the decision represents the destiny of us all. Even if one chooses *not to decide* or to suspend the
decision, at the end of the day *he has made a decision*. One cannot escape the political no matter how much he may want to.

It would be a mistake to understand Schmitt’s thought as an apology of violence or as a complete rejection of the idea of negotiation and compromise, and ultimately as an attempt to turn the exception into the norm. As pointed out by Schmitt:

[*W*ar is neither the aim nor the purpose nor even the very content of politics. But as an ever present possibility it is the leading presupposition which determines in a characteristic way human action and thinking and thereby creates a specifically political behavior...What always matters is the possibility of the extreme case taking place,” for “the rule proves nothing” while “the exception proves everything (Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 34-5).

Schmitt argues that, “a philosophy of concrete life must not withdraw from the exception and the extreme case, but must be interested in it to the highest degree” (*Ibid*, 15). As for the nature of the friend-enemy relation, Schmitt underlines the fact that we are not dealing with “competition or with intellectual controversy [but that] the friend-enemy and combat concepts receive their real meaning precisely because they refer to the real possibility of physical killing” (*Ibid*, 33).

Thus, Schmitt divides political theories in two categories: those according to which man is at least *dangerous*, if not outright *evil*, and those in the tradition of the left according to which man is ultimately (although this might require the completion of the historical process) *harmless*. It is Schmitt's manifest belief that, “all genuine political theories presuppose man to be evil, i.e., by no means an unproblematic but a dangerous and dynamic being” (*Ibid*, 58-61).

We can draw an analogy between Schmitt's reflection on the state of exception, reflection, which is directly related to Schmitt’s belief in the potentially dangerous character of human nature, and Kierkegaard's observation from *The Sickness Unto Death* that by nature all men are desperate. But while some of them perpetually struggle throughout their lives to increase their awareness of this fact, as Kierkegaard argues, the rest (the majority) operate exactly in the opposite direction. They are struggling to forget their human condition (*The Sickness Unto Death*, 42). As such, it is only the first category that will be able to confront the exceptional moment in their lives, the fundamental metaphysical moment when God, and the theological return: the moment of
death. According to the theological perspective, those who deny their existential despair will suffer eternal damnation, which corresponds through analogy with the physical annihilation of the liberal in the realm of the political.

The liberal dystopia and the ethical potentialities of the political

Thus, at a first glance, for Schmitt, the liberal project appears to be an anti-political utopia, as Schmitt expresses the firm conviction that “state and politics cannot be exterminated”, for the world itself “will not be depoliticalized” (The Concept of the Political, 78). And as said before, the paradoxical outcome of the liberal attempt to dissolve the political is the radicalization of the political at both ends of the political spectrum.

Leo Strauss however, in his analysis of Schmitt's Concept of the Political, believes that Schmitt is not quite sure that the political will not disappear. In fact Strauss is suggesting that Schmitt actually fears the eventual disappearance of the political. Strauss believes that if you read Schmitt's work between the lines, you realize that Schmitt is not simply depicting politics in a realist manner, but that he is affirming the political. And it is Strauss' belief that Schmitt is affirming the political “because he realizes that when the political is threatened, the seriousness of life is threatened as well” and that “the only guarantee against the world becoming a world of entertainment is politics and the state” (Comments on Carl Schmitt's Der Begriff des Politischen, 98-9).

According to Schmitt, liberalism imposes a culture of compromise aiming at the “neutralization of conflicts based on religious confession, ideas or ideals, in order to produce the greatest possible tolerance, the civil peace, an ambient that would permit the free development of economy, science and the arts” (La Querelle de la Secularisation, 145-6). But for Schmitt, this apparent liberal will to weakness is in fact a terrifying liberal will to power, as the paralyzing strength of liberalism consists precisely in this faculty “of neutralizing the stakes which its adversaries hold as essential, and of preventing the emergence of absolute options that would annihilate other options” (Ibid). Schmitt subscribes to Max Weber’s description of modern liberalism as “polytheism of values”, and writes that, “the disenchantment of the ancient gods and their transformation into pure values renders the combat spectral and turns the combatants into desperate
pettifoggers” (Ibid).

Strauss believes therefore that Schmitt's political theory represents only the beginning of a much more profound critique of liberalism. In fact, Schmitt himself admits that he is not providing an alternative to liberalism but only “a theoretical framework for an immense problem” (The Concept of the Political, 83).

It appears to Strauss that in the last instance, Schmitt's affirmation of the political conceals an affirmation of the moral. Strauss believes that only in such an eventuality would Schmitt's critique of liberalism be truly fulfilled. Its success depends on a capacity for “gaining an horizon beyond liberalism” as for the moment Schmitt's “critique of liberalism takes place within the horizon of liberalism”. According to Strauss:

Schmitt's ultimate concern is not the fight against liberalism...but the order of human things [...] the polemic against liberalism can therefore have no meaning other than that of a subsidiary or preparatory action. It is undertaken only to clear the field for the decisive battle between the 'spirit of technology', the 'mass faith of an antireligious, this-worldly activism' and the opposite spirit and faith, which”, as Strauss affirms very mysteriously, “does not yet have a name”. (Comments on Carl Schmitt’s Der Begriff des Politischen, 104-5)

Schmitt's aim would be thus revealed closer to the Nietzschean struggle to prevent the appearance of the last man, the a-political man who has nothing to fight for, “well fed, well clothed, well housed and well medicated” (An Introduction to Political Philosophy, 97). Both Schmitt and Nietzsche ultimately aim at rescuing the man who seeks agreement at any price from the grips of welfare existence. According to Strauss:

[If] one wishes agreement at any price, there is no other way than to abandon altogether the question of what is right”, or it is because of “the seriousness of the question of what is right [that] the political—the division of the human race into foes and friends—is justified (Comments on Carl Schmitt’s Der Begriff des Politischen, 100-1).

Yet, the simple “affirmation of the political as such” represents for Strauss nothing more than “the affirmation of fighting as such” and consequently it points to Schmitt’s failure to overcome liberalism, more exactly, his incapacity to overcome the thought of Machiavelli and Hobbes, the founding fathers of political modernity. Strauss underlines the fact that “whoever affirms the political as such respects all who are willing to fight; he is quite as tolerant as the liberals, but with the opposite intentions”. Such an approach proves to be nothing more than “liberalism preceded by a minus sign”. For this reason, “the affirmation of the political as such can therefore do no more than prepare
the way for a radical critique of liberalism” (*Ibid*, 102-3).

**The absence of the *katechon* and its modern simulacrum**

As for Schmitt, for the moment at least, he cannot leave us anything more than a decision grounded in nothing and pointing at nothing beyond it, something that can again be compared with Kierkegaard’s decisionistic leap from doubt to faith. In *Political Theology*, Schmitt is in fact disconnecting the 19th century Counter-Revolutionary authors such as Donoso Cortés, and Joseph de Maistre from the theological horizon in which they still situated themselves, although problematically from the point of view of Catholic orthodoxy, turns them into decisionists, “hobbesianizes” them (*Sous l’Oeil du Grand Inquisiteur – Carl Schmitt et l’Heritage de la Theologie Politique*, 33), and places them in the horizon of liberalism, the horizon that has been wiped away with a sponge by the madman from Nietzsche’s *Gay Science* as a consequence of the death of God. In Schmitt's equation named *Political Theology*, the first term always determines the second. According to Robert Howse, “Schmitt's last word is not theology or any transcendent basis for human seriousness...it is the unconstrained rule of the strong over the weak”. For Howse, “the core of *Political Theology* is not a return to the City of God...but the ultimate translation of transcendent categories into the immanent” (*From Legitimacy to Dictatorship - and Back Again – Leo Strauss's critique of the Anti-Liberalism of Carl Schmitt*, 59-71). Thus, confronted with the crisis of parliamentary democracy, Schmitt appeals to one of Joseph de Maistre’s assessments which situate the counter-revolutionary author in the Nietzschean logic of beyond good and evil: “it is definitely not in our interest that a question be decided in a way or another but that it be decided without delay and without appeal” (*Political Theology*, 56). According to Schmitt’s interpretation, in their confrontation with revolutionary radicalism, the Catholic Counter-Revolutionaries have “heightened the moment of the decision to such an extent that the notion of legitimacy, their starting point, was finally dissolved” (*Ibid*, 65).

If we leave aside his eventual opportunism, Schmitt’s decisionistic secularization of theology might also explain his concrete political options, more exactly his support of Hitler, and ultimately his unfortunate identification of the *katechon* (a theologico-political Christian concept originating from St. Paul’s Second Epistle to the Thessalonians which
refers to something or someone that delays the coming of the Antichrist, and which plays a major role in Schmitt’s thought) in the midst of the crisis of the Weimar Republic, failed identification which can be theologico-politically equated with a phenomenon of demonic delusion, for, as written by St. Paul, “Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light” (2Corinthians 11, 14). If we are to follow Theodore Paleologue’s interpretation of Schmitt’s understanding of the *katechon*, Schmitt is susceptible to champion two possible versions of the *katechon*, which implicitly lead to two possible Schmittian understandings of the “mystery of lawlessness” which according to Paul “is already at work” in the world and will triumph at the end of time, when after “the falling away”, “the son of perdition will be revealed” (2Thessalonians 3, 18).

As already said, both of these understandings could explain Schmitt’s initial support for Hitler, something which would have been unconceivable for Joseph de Maistre or Donoso Cortés. According to the first interpretation, for Schmitt, in the modern period, the *katechon* is the force that prevents the triumph of communism or the collapse of the state into anarchy. As such, Paleologue underlines the fact that for Schmitt, an authentic *katechon* should be institutional, political and efficient. A Roman Catholic himself, Schmitt rejected the identification of the *katechon* with the prayer and spiritual perfection of the Saints, subscribing instead to Hegel’s assessment that the legal, institutional order is “the Spirit rendered effective” (*Sous l’Oeil du Grand Inquisiteur – Carl Schmitt et l’Heritage de la Theologie Politique*, 40, 189). According to a second and more profound interpretation however, to which Schmitt hasn’t officially subscribed, but to which he is ultimately susceptible, the *katechon* is the element that prevents the triumph of neutralizations and depoliticalizations, the triumph of the liberal utopia associated by Schmitt with Huxley’s *Brave New World*. Founded on the postulate of the good and rational character of human nature, the liberal utopia can be challenged by anybody who is willing to fight for something, ultimately even for the sake of fighting as such, protesting like Dostoyevsky’s man from the underground against the dictatorship of the liberal rational choice theory, through a plunge into violent irrationality.

It would be fascinating in the end to compare the reactions that two different thinkers had in front of the eruption of the pan-European revolution of 1848, when Karl Marx’ Manifesto of the Communist Party was for the first time read to the masses.
Horrified by the burning of the throne of Louis Philippe in Paris, Donoso Cortés, at that
time a liberal, has immediately and completely abandoned his doctrinaire political
conceptions, and wrote his *Ensayo sobre el Catolicismo, el Liberalismo, y el Socialismo*,
a work reflecting “the despair...often bordering insanity [of] an absolutist philosopher of
the state [whose affirmations concerning] the natural depravity and vileness of man were
indeed more horrible than anything that had ever been alleged” (*Political Theology*, 58).
And yet, witnessing the same event, Kierkegaard was affirming that, “the rabble can no
longer be held in check by means of figures of legitimacy, a king, a Kaiser, a general, but
only by a martyr” (*The Political Theology of Paul*, 69). Unlike Schmitt, Kierkegaard
seems to point to another type of *katechon*. He puts his hope in “the power of the
powerless”, to paraphrase the title of a book by Vaclav Havel, in persons such as
Alexander Solzhenitsyn for example. And thus, by abandoning the Hobbesian criterion of
political efficiency, Kierkegaard manages to offer us a glimpse of that “horizon beyond
liberalism”.

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