

CARL SCHMITT: THE PERSISTENCE OF THE POLITICAL

But why should one return to the older tradition, when the newer world of commerce and capitalism at every point seems so much simpler and happier and more pragmatic? The German legal scholar Carl Schmitt offers an extreme alternative to Locke and all the thinkers of the Enlightenment. He concedes with the signatories of Westphalia that there never will be any agreement on the most important things, on questions of religion and virtue and the nature of humanity.³⁰ But where Locke says that it is in humanity's nature to know nothing about the nature of humanity, Schmitt responds that it is equally a part of the human condition to be divided by such questions and to be forced to take sides.³¹

Politics is the field of battle in which that division takes place, in which humans are forced to choose between friends and enemies. "The high points of politics," declares Schmitt, "are the moments in which the enemy is, in concrete clarity, recognized as the enemy."³² The enemy is the one whose very presence forces us to confront the foundational questions about human nature anew; "the enemy is our own question as a figure."³³ Because of the permanence of these always contentious questions, one cannot unilaterally escape from all politics; those who attempt to do so are suffering from moments of supreme self-delusion; these include the signatories of the Kellogg Pact of 1928, which outlawed all war.³⁴

Indeed, it is even worse: "[I]f a part of the population declares that it no longer recognizes enemies, then, depending on the circumstance, it joins their side and aids them."³⁵ There is no safety in unilateral disarmament. When one chooses not to decide, one still has made a choice—invariably a mistaken choice, which implicitly assumes that humankind is fundamentally good or unproblematic.³⁶ For Schmitt, "it is a symptom of the political end":

In Russia, before the Revolution, the doomed classes romanticized the Russian peasant as a good, brave, and Christian muzhik. . . . The aristocratic society of France before the Revolution of 1789 sentimentalized "man who is by nature good" and the virtue of the masses. . . . Nobody scented the revolution; it is incredible to see the security and unsuspectingness with which these privileged spoke of the goodness, mildness, and innocence of the people when 1793 was already upon them—*spectacle ridicule et terrible*.³⁷

Absent an invasion by aliens from outer space, there never can be a world state that politically unites all of humanity. It is a logical impossibility:

The political entity cannot by its very nature be universal in the sense of embracing all of humanity and the entire world. If the different states, religions, classes, and other human groupings on earth should be so unified that a conflict among them is impossible and even inconceivable and if civil war should forever be foreclosed in a realm that embraces the globe, then the distinction of friend and enemy would also cease.³⁸

In the medieval Catholic tradition, Schmitt sees the permanent political division of humanity as a pale reflection of an “eschatologically conceived state of historicity,” which ultimately forces people to follow or reject Christ.³⁹ He connects the political and the religious by declaring himself against the “neutralizers, aesthetic inhabitants of Cockaigne, abortionists, cremationists and pacifists.”⁴⁰ Just as pacifists believe that the political decision can be avoided in this world, so cremators reject the physical resurrection and the religious decision that needs to be made for the next world.

In this way, politics serves as a constant reminder to a fallen humanity that life is serious and that there are things that truly matter, and so Schmitt cites with great approval the Puritan Oliver Cromwell’s speech denouncing Spain:

Why, truly, your great Enemy is the Spaniard. He is the natural enemy. He is naturally so; he is naturally so throughout, by reason of that enmity that is in him against whatsoever is of God. “Whatsoever is of God” which is in you, or which may be in you.⁴¹

When bin Laden declares war on “the infidels, the Zionists, and the crusaders,” Schmitt would not counsel reasoned half-measures. He would urge a new crusade as a way to rediscover the meaning and purpose of our lives, perhaps borrowing the exhortation from Pope Urban II at the Council of Clermont, who urged his eager listeners on to the First Crusade back in 1096: “Let the army of the Lord, when it rushes upon his enemies, shout but that one cry, *‘Dieu le veult! Dieu le veult!’*”

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Whatever its shortcomings, Schmitt’s account of politics captures the essential strangeness of the unfolding confrontation between the West and Islam. This strangeness consists of the radical difference between the way the confrontation itself is viewed by the two sides. Perhaps never before in history

has there been such a radical difference. The Islamic side retains a strong religious and political conception of reality; it views its struggle with the West as a matter more important than life and death, because Allah will judge his followers in the afterlife by how they performed in that struggle. Bin Laden would quote with approval the speeches of Cromwell and Urban II, requiring almost no changes at all. The language still resonates and motivates heroic self-sacrifice.

By contrast, on the Western side (if it can even be called a side), there is great confusion over what the fighting is for, and why there should be a civilizational war at all. An outright declaration of war against Islam would be unthinkable; we much prefer to think of these measures as police actions against a few unusual criminal sociopaths who happen to blow up buildings. We are nervous about considering a larger meaning to the struggle, and even the staunchest Western partisans of war know that we no longer believe in the existence of a *Gott mit uns* in heaven.

And then one encounters Schmitt's troubling challenge. A side in which everyone, like Hobbes, values this earthly life more than death is a side where everyone will run away from fighting and confrontation; but when one runs away from an enemy that continues to fight, one is ultimately going to lose—no matter how great the numerical or technological superiority may appear at the outset. Schmitt's solution to this impending defeat demands an affirmation of the political in the West. Here, however, one must confront an alternative and perhaps even more troubling conclusion. For let us assume that it is possible, somehow, to turn back the clock and set aside our uncertainties; that we can return to the faith of Cromwell and Urban II; that we understand Islam as the providential enemy of the West; and that we can then respond to Islam with the same ferocity with which it is now attacking the West. This would be a Pyrrhic victory, for it would come at the price of doing away with everything that fundamentally distinguishes the modern West from Islam.

A dangerous dynamic lurks in Schmitt's division of the world into friends and enemies. It is a dynamic that destroys the distinction and that altogether escapes Schmitt's clever calculations: one must choose one's enemies well, for one will soon be just like them.

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If one agrees with Schmitt's starting assumptions, then the West must lose the war or lose its identity. One way or the other, the persistence of the political spells the doom of the modern West; but for the sake of completeness, we

must consider also the inverse possibility, indirectly hinted at in the margins of Schmitt's own writings. For while it may well be that the political guarantees the seriousness of life and that, so long as the political exists, the world will remain divided, there is no guarantee that the political itself will survive.⁴²

Let us grant that unilateral disarmament is impossible, at least for those who value survival, but is it not perhaps possible for everyone to disarm at once, and for everyone to reject politics at the same time? There can be no worldwide political entity, but there is a possibility of a worldwide abandonment of politics.

The Hegelian Alexandre Kojève believed that the end of history would be marked by the definitive abandonment of all the hard questions. Humanity itself would disappear, but there would no longer be any conflict:

If Man becomes an animal again, his acts, his loves, and his play must also become purely "natural" again. Hence it would have to be admitted that after the end of History, men would construct their edifices and works of art as birds build their nests and spiders spin their webs. . . . "The *definitive annihilation* of Man *properly so-called*" also means the definitive disappearance of human Discourse (Logos) in the strict sense. Animals of the species *Homo sapiens* would react by conditioned reflexes to vocal signals or sign "language," and thus their so-called "discourses" would be like what is supposed to be the "language" of bees. What would disappear, then, is not only Philosophy or the search for discursive Wisdom, but also that Wisdom itself.⁴³

Schmitt echoes these sentiments, albeit with rather different conclusions. In such a unified world, "what remains is neither politics nor state, but culture, civilization, economics, morality, law, art, entertainment, etc."⁴⁴ The world of "entertainment" represents the culmination of the shift away from politics. A representation of reality might appear to replace reality: instead of violent wars, there could be violent video games; instead of heroic feats, there could be thrilling amusement park rides; instead of serious thought, there could be "intrigues of all sorts," as in a soap opera. It is a world where people spend their lives amusing themselves to death.

Schmitt does not reject the possibility of such a world out of hand, but believes that it will not happen in an entirely autochthonous manner:

The acute question to pose is upon whom will fall the frightening power implied in a world-embracing economic and technical organization. This question can by no means be dismissed in the belief that everything would

then function automatically, that things would administer themselves, and that a government by people over people would be superfluous because human beings would then be absolutely free. For what would they be free? This can be answered by optimistic or pessimistic conjectures, all of which finally lead to an anthropological profession of faith.⁴⁵

Such an artificial world requires a “religion of technicity” that has faith in the “unlimited power and dominion over nature . . . [and] in the unlimited potential for change and for happiness in the natural this-worldly existence of man.”⁴⁶ For Schmitt the political theologian, this “Babylonian unity” represents a brief harmony that prefigures the final catastrophe of the Apocalypse.⁴⁷ Following the medieval tradition, Schmitt knows and fears that this artificial unity can be brought about only by the shadowy figure of the Antichrist.⁴⁸ He will surreptitiously take over the entire world at the end of human history by seducing people with the promise of “peace and security”:

God created the world; the Antichrist counterfeits it. . . . The sinister magician recreates the world, changes the face of the earth, and subdues nature. Nature serves him; for what purpose is a matter of indifference—for any satisfaction of artificial needs, for ease and comfort. Men who allow themselves to be deceived by him see only the fabulous effect; nature seems to be overcome, the age of security dawns; everything has been taken care of, a clever foresight and planning replace Providence.⁴⁹

The world where everything seems to administer itself is the world of science fiction, of Stephenson’s *Snow Crash*, or of *The Matrix* for those who choose not to take their red pills. But no representation of reality ever is the same as reality, and one must never lose sight of the larger framework within which the representation exists. The price of abandoning oneself to such an artificial representation is always too high, because the decisions that are avoided are always too important.⁵⁰ By making people forget that they have souls, the Antichrist will succeed in swindling people out of them.⁵¹

LEO STRAUSS: PROCEED WITH CAUTION

We are at an impasse.

On the one hand, we have the newer project of the Enlightenment, which never became comprehensive on a global scale, and perhaps always came at