

POLITICAL ROMANTICISM

(CARL SCHMITT)

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To my excitement, Carl Schmitt is coming back into fashion, or at least into notice. Last week, for example, an excellent piece by the Swedish renegade leftist Malcolm Kyeyune received wide attention. It revolved around Schmitt's concept, from *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, that when a regime must prove its legitimacy empirically, it is doomed. Kyeyune concluded that, just as the "bourgeois kings" of Schmitt's analysis were doomed because they had lost intrinsic legitimacy, so has, and is, our own regime. Now I wish I had thought of and made that point in my own recent review of that book. Ah well. Instead, today you will have to be satisfied with my reflections on another book, Schmitt's first, *Political Romanticism*.

I am now working my way through all of Schmitt's works that have been translated into English (having already completed *The Crisis* and the much later *Theory of the Partisan*). Schmitt was not an ideologue, so his thoughts over the decades contained multitudes and did not maintain total consistency, though his mature works are all opposed to the liberal tradition that dominated Europe during his lifetime (1888–1985). He was willing to take his anti-liberalism quite far—famously, he toadied to the National Socialists for a brief period, before being cast out for being an opportunist, and was fortunate not to suffer worse ill consequences. *Political Romanticism*, however, is not on its face a book about liberalism or anti-liberalism; unlike some of Schmitt's later work, it is hard to tell from the pages of the book what the politics of the author are. Instead, it's an extended attack on nineteenth-century romanticism, in particular in the person of Adam Müller, for the sin of refusing to engage in politics or to choose among alternatives, justifying that refusal as a higher commitment to aesthetics.

I was somewhat annoyed by this 1986 translation (the only one in English, though Lars Vinx, a professor at Cambridge, has recently translated some more obscure Schmitt works, so maybe he will offer new translations of the well-known works). Not because it's a bad translation—that I can't tell, since most of the German I used to know I've forgotten. Rather because of its terrible footnotes. First, the translator,

Guy Oakes, admits he failed to include most of Schmitt's own footnotes. And second, no new explanatory footnotes are included, which would have greatly helped the reader navigate the obscurities in Schmitt's writing for the modern reader. Much of the book is taken up with extended discussions of people of whom you have likely barely heard, or of whom you have not heard at all. At least I hadn't heard much about many of them, and I'm pretty well informed. No doubt new footnotes would have made the translator's job more burdensome, but lack of them means the reader has to spend a lot of time with reference works to understand much of *Political Romanticism*.

Anyway, in the same way as all Schmitt's works, this book rewards hard work. As with *Theory of the Partisan*, it seems at first glance that much of the analysis is tied to a specific time and place, but it actually has far broader applicability. *Political Romanticism* was published in 1919 (and revised in 1925, from which this translation was made). In many of Schmitt's works the then-current political situation seeps in, but not here, despite that Schmitt was studying in Munich in 1919, and lived through the Communist revolt there. Nor does he touch on the Weimar constitution, also promulgated in 1919. Rather, the focus is on the early nineteenth century—with implications, as I say, for both Schmitt's own time and ours.

Perhaps because of Schmitt's relative youth (he was thirty-one in 1919), he takes a more polemical stance in this book than in his later, more famous, works. His core complaint about romanticism is that it relativizes all thought; it rejects a metaphysical core and substitutes aesthetic judgment. If he were alive today, he might criticize romanticism as a precursor of liquid modernity, Zygmunt Bauman's term for the dissolution of any solid core of our society and its replacement by ever-shifting and personalized beliefs.

The translator, Oakes, claims in his long but not-very-good Introduction that Schmitt's attack on political romanticism is an attack on liberalism. His theory is that the liberal state introduced the rule of law and a private sphere, both of which are necessary for romanticism to flourish. But this is obvious tripe; both the rule of law and the private sphere long antedated liberalism, and in fact are the crucial markers of Western Christendom. Moreover, even if it were true that romanticism relies for its existence on the rule of the law and the private sphere,

something Schmitt does not say or even imply, the mere fact of an attack on romanticism on other grounds does not make it a concealed attack on those underlying supports. Oakes is, however, as we will see, not wholly wrong when he says that *Political Romanticism* is “a critique of the metaphysical and metapolitical bases of modern liberalism.”

Schmitt spends the first part of the book (and much of his lengthy Preface to the 1925 edition) talking about romanticism itself. This is somewhat of a challenge, because romanticism is notoriously protean, and differed over time and, especially, among countries. (Schmitt ignores English romantics, focusing only on the Germans and the French.) Romanticism isn't just smelling the flowers and admiring medieval castles, nor is it a reaction against rationalism. “[T]he romantic attempts to define everything in terms of himself and avoids every definition of himself in terms of something else.” Nor is it tradition, or an opposition to established power. After rejecting various such definitions, Schmitt defines romanticism as a type of occasionalism.

In theological terms, occasionalism is the doctrine that all events, no matter how small, are the direct result of an act of will by God. (This is often found in branches of Islam, but rarely in Christianity.) Schmitt precisely defines romanticism as “subjectified occasionalism”—God disappears, and every event, even the tiniest, becomes an opportunity for the romantic to produce an aesthetic, emotional feeling, the existence of which has no other meaning or importance. The world is viewed through this prism, which means to the romantic, “the world is only occasional, a world without substance and functional cohesion, without a fixed direction, without consistency and definition, without decision, without a final court of appeal, continuing into infinity and led only by the magic hand of chance.” Occasionalism denies “calculable causality, and thus also every binding norm.”

What the romantic pursues most of all is a synthesis, a harmony of opposites that displaces the need to make choices. “In the absence of the occasionalistic displacement into the higher, subjective creativity that resolves all antitheses in a harmonious unity, there is no romanticism.” Beautiful phrases lovingly crafted hide that this is a waste of time and a way to avoid commitment by talking all the damn time. (Schmitt really despises trite, meandering talk; I wonder if he was unpopular at cocktail parties, although he was very well-connected and was socially adept,

so maybe he could talk about the weather when he had to.) In the same way, the romantic does not, cannot, hold to any fixed position; he may support the revolution today, and the counter-revolution tomorrow, seeing no contradiction, only a romantic flow of occasions. "Because the concrete point around which the romantic novel develops is always merely occasional, everything can become romantic. In such a world, all political or religious distinctions are dissolved into an interesting ambiguity. The king is a romantic figure as well as the anarchist conspirator, and the caliph of Baghdad is no less romantic than the patriarch of Jerusalem. Here everything can be substituted for everything else."

Of great importance, this way of viewing the world exalts the individual. Traditions and hierarchies are as nothing in this view, instead, we have the romantic "endless conversation" with no fixed points and no conclusions. This is atomizing. What romanticism offers is unlimited possibilities. This is an approach that fundamentally opposes reality, and ensures that a prime motivator of a romantic's actions is to stave off the need to make a choice. For the romantic, what he feels, the aesthetic experience of emotion, is the most important thing. Schmitt would see the logical endpoint of this today, where the individual is paramount, feelings are everything, and emotivism is one of the prime drivers of politics, both on the Left and the Right, though more on the Left.

Quite a few pages are taken up with precise discussion of how the romantics thought and behaved, analyzing their antecedents, use of language, and so forth. (Interestingly, in passing, Schmitt cites Victor Klemperer for a philological point; Klemperer became famous much later for his diaries of life as a Jew in the Third Reich.) We get attacks on Müller from every angle, along with some on Friedrich Schlegel for good measure, and these attacks are used to repeatedly flog romanticism as a whole. "The rootlessness of the romantic, his incapacity to hold fast to an important political idea on the basis of a free decision, his lack of inner resistance to the most powerful and immediate impression that happens to prevail at the time—all these things have their individual reasons." But they are not good reasons.

After this relentless barrage, which includes memorable phrases such as "the effeminate raptures of those two bourgeois literati Schlegel and Müller," Schmitt turns to the specific political implications of romanticism, which is after all the main point of the book. (But not before he

tells us that Müller's "amoral appreciation of everything . . . his effeminate passivity . . . and his emotional pantheism . . . can probably be explained in an individual-psychological fashion as well, as a consequence of his feminine and vegetative nature." Ha ha.) In any case, the "essence of [romanticism] is passivity." A romantic outlook makes one incapable of choosing a moral, or legal, position. This can be aesthetically pleasing, part of the "endless conversation," but it is totally lacking in political productivity, in the real world, where such decisions must be made in order for society to function. Here Schmitt swings into high gear, castigating Müller and his kind by comparison with thinkers such as Edmund Burke, Louis de Bonald, and Joseph de Maistre, who in the mind of some bear indicia of romanticism, but in fact are not political romantics at all.

The result is that the romantic denies the importance of justice, a focus on which is "the most important source of political vitality." Instead, they substitute inconsistency, "though with splendid words about the necessity of [their] position." They "speak and float in the beautiful movement of a social conversation." This produces "moral helplessness in the face of each new impression" and makes necessary political life impossible. "An emotion that does not transcend the limits of the subjective cannot be the foundation of a community . . . [N]o society can discover an order without a concept of what is normal and what is right. Conceptually, the normal is unromantic because every norm destroys the occasional license of the romantic." The essence of the romantic is "the renunciation of every active alteration of the real world." Everything is fragmentary for the romantic, capable of being part of some higher synthesis, the achievement of which is so eagerly sought. No side needs to be chosen; there is always more talking to do. Schmitt does make some allowances—not every person who has a heightened aesthetic sense is such a useless political romantic; there are also romantic politicians, who rather than seeking a higher harmony that erases making distinctions and choices, inform their moral choices with an aesthetic sense (Schmitt gives the interesting example of Don Quixote).

What is the application of all this today? At first glance, not much. Romanticism is no longer a relevant current of intellectual thought. Or is it? Some elements of romanticism are visible in the thought of today's

Left, notably the importance of subjective feelings. Schmitt refers to romanticism as an “emotive response to political events,” which sums up much of our politics today. But I think that is a secondary element of today’s Left, and also affects the Right, because it is the end product of the hyper-feminization of much of our society. The primary markers of the Left are, as I have noted many times and stole from Roger Scruton, are a simultaneous exaltation of total autonomy, emancipation from unchosen bonds, and of total equality, where no excellence can be permitted. To some extent, the rejection of norms that necessarily characterizes romanticism in Schmitt’s analysis fits precisely with the modern Left, but their reason for rejecting norms results from the demand for emancipation at any societal price, not from a refined aesthetic calculus. And the Left is very much interested in political decisions and choices, in altering the real world, not in the romantic search for a higher synthesis that removes thought to a more abstract plane.

As Gopal Balakrishnan points out in his analysis of Schmitt’s thought, *The Enemy*, Schmitt is usually associated with the anti-Weimar Conservative Revolutionaries, but at this point, similarities were hard to discern. Yes, Schmitt expresses some contempt for the liberal bourgeois view of life, but that criticism could be Left as much as Right. German Romanticism was something very important to many of the Conservative Revolutionaries, such as Arthur Moeller van den Bruck, reinforcing that this book can be taken in part as an attack on the German Right of 1919. Schmitt’s later turn to the intellectual Right was thus perhaps not preordained.

No doubt annoying Schmitt, the reaction to the 1919 publication of this book was a resurgence of interest in Müller; Schmitt’s Preface to the 1925 edition notes this, and denies that he’s responsible just because he “discussed an insignificant and questionable personality such as Adam Müller in far too much detail.” Nor did Schmitt return much, if it all, to the themes of *Political Romanticism* in his later thought. Yet this book is important because it begins Schmitt’s analysis of politics, which he extended to great benefit. Visible here are the roots of Schmitt’s later thoughts on decisionism, on the need for a choice between good and evil, and other crucial views. Also visible is Schmitt’s antipathy toward unmoored individualism, which became more important in his thinking over time. It is explicitly present in the Preface, where he notes that “The

ultimate roots of romanticism and the romantic phenomenon lie in the private priesthood.” He is not attacking Protestants; what he means is “romanticism makes the individual [the bourgeois world’s] own point of reference, and imposes upon it the entire burden that otherwise was hierarchically distributed among different functions in a social order.” This leads to “despair,” and certainly, what we can see all around us is despair resulting from the destruction of an organic social order.

Thus, even if Schmitt did not intend to attack the Left, much of this book reads as an assault on elements of Left thought as they have developed in the past one hundred years. That alone makes it fun, and while this book is often overlooked, and I’m not sure it’s essential reading, it’s not a waste of time.