

THE CONCEPT OF THE POLITICAL

(CARL SCHMITT)

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This, Carl Schmitt's best-known work, first published in 1932, is a crucial book for our present moment. The clear-eyed Schmitt, who stands far above any modern political philosopher, writes here of timeless principles that lie behind political action, and he slices through the ignorance, doublespeak, and confusion that surround any discussion today of the "why" of politics. As always, he offers a crisp analysis of reality, with implications and applications for all times and moments. And for Christians in today's America, this book has extra value, because reading it restores the proper Christian understanding of "enemy," something that has been (quite recently) lost, to our great detriment.

The Concept of the Political is not infrequently brought up today, though I very much doubt most people who mention it have read it. They should, however—it is more accessible than most of Schmitt's books, even if it's not beach reading. As with most, or maybe all, of Schmitt's work, it only became available in English decades after it was originally published. George Schwab translated it in 1976 (discussing the translation with Schmitt himself), although as far as I can tell Schwab's translation was only first published in 1996. This 2007 revised edition contains not only the core book (which is an expansion of an article Schmitt published in 1927), but an Introduction by Schwab, a Foreword by the political scientist Tracy B. Strong, and a translation of a 1929 article by Schmitt related to the book, which had been published with the 1932 edition. Finally, and quite interestingly, this edition contains notes made by Leo Strauss in response to Schmitt's original publication.

We should first dispose of a stumbling block to Schmitt appreciation, his famous dalliance with the National Socialists, out of his desire to make his mark on history. Strong makes this the central theme of his Foreword, and any discussion of Schmitt usually discusses this episode at length. But really, who cares? The fact itself tells us nothing, except that little has changed since Plato went to Syracuse to direct and mold the tyrant Dionysus, and barely escaped with his life. Intellectuals often cozy up to dubious regimes, drawn by power like moths to a flame. We should instead ask ourselves, why do we always hear about Schmitt's brief

ties to the National Socialists, while we never hear how intellectuals of the Left have, for more than a century, wholly and unreservedly supported all actions of all modern Left regimes, including Stalin and Pol Pot, which regimes have killed far more people and caused far more damage to the world than did Hitler and his henchmen?

It does not take a genius to understand why. All references to the National Socialists today are not offered for historical insight, but rather are a demand for preemptive apologies—"I'm not like those Nazis, and I can prove it by bowing to you!"—used to keep the Right on the back foot. Schmitt's ties to the National Socialists, irrelevant to any aspect of his thought, are only brought up by the Left to dismiss Schmitt. They are afraid of him, because he shows they are on the wrong side of history, hurtling down a dead end. This is, to be sure, just the usual Left practice of dishonestly refusing to engage with any Right argument—though it is no matter, because the time for engagement is long past, and we should not be wasting any time in trying to achieve engagement, at least intellectual engagement. And the Right needs to spend zero time thinking about or talking about the National Socialists, except to the extent history is interesting (they should, in this context, be thought of in the same sense as we think of the Etruscans), and to the extent their seizure of power offers valuable lessons that can be applied today.

While we're disposing of anti-Schmitt propaganda, we should address a second criticism of the man. This is a bit more substantive, though not by much. He is not "nice," in the same way as Niccolò Machiavelli or Thomas Hobbes (one of his heroes) is not nice. True, the gravamen of this complaint has changed over time—such carping used to mean that a writer was immoral because he was too realist and unwilling to demand all political action be based on Christian morality, while today it means a writer is inadequately feminized, found disagreeable because he offers truth, and his writing is by its existence a reproach to Left featherweights such as John Rawls. The practical use of this criticism by the Left is that anyone who finds value in someone not "nice" is himself deemed toxic, therefore anathema and someone who must be ignored. In either case, this criticism is nearly as dishonest as the first criticism, because it is also an attempt to avoid engagement, in this case with reality itself, and it should receive the same treatment—being disregarded.

With that out of the way, let's get on with today's event. Schmitt begins by pointing out "The concept of the state presupposes the concept of the political." Whatever else the modern state may be, it is an entity born of a particular people, a particular society, that exercises authority on behalf of that people. What does political mean, then? It cannot be defined as what pertains to the state; that is circular.

We can figure out what the political is, however, by working backward. Every "endeavor of human thought and action" has final distinctions—good and evil for morality, beautiful and ugly in aesthetics, and so forth. Politics is no different. "The specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy." The enemy is "the other, the stranger." The enemy "is, in a specially intense way, existentially something different and alien, so that in "the extreme case conflicts with him are possible. These can neither be decided by a previously determined general norm nor by the judgment of a disinterested and therefore neutral third party." Such conflict is "the extreme case," but only the "actual participants can . . . judge the concrete situation and settle" the conflict. The participants base this decision on 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." The specific reasons that drive this decision vary; the essence is that the distinction among two groups exists.

Thus, we come to a definition of the political. "The political is the most intense and extreme antagonism, and every concrete antagonism becomes that much more political the closer it approaches the most extreme point, that of the friend-enemy grouping." "The phenomenon of the political can be understood only in the context of the ever present possibility of the friend-and-enemy grouping, regardless of the aspects which this possibility implies for morality, aesthetics, and economics." Any antithesis that forces groups into the position of friend and enemy is political, and this determines the "mode of behavior," which supersedes prior antitheses, such as religion and class, creating "the decisive human grouping, the political entity."

All political action revolves around this distinction, even when the "extreme case" is far from anyone's mind, and therefore "all political concepts, images, and terms" have a polemical meaning grounded

in this distinction. And the ultimate form of that polemic is combat, which Schmitt does not shrink from defining, in its essence, as killing other men. "War follows from enmity. War is the existential negation of the enemy. It is the most extreme consequence of enmity. It does not have to be common, normal, something ideal, or desirable. But it must nevertheless remain a real possibility for as long as the concept of the enemy remains valid."

(Schmitt is very clear that he uses the term enemy in the sense of "public enemy," rather than "private enemy." "An enemy exists only when, at least potentially, one fighting collectivity of people confronts a similar collectivity." For Christians trying to live up to the commands of Christ, this is a key distinction, to which we will return.)

Schmitt rains contempt on those who try to avoid this existential distinction, trying to frame as central to politics instead economic competition or intellectual debate, or find the distinction and the conclusions it drives barbaric and hope that if it is ignored, it will disappear. "The concern here is neither with abstractions nor with normative ideals, but with inherent reality." At the same time, Schmitt is at pains to point out that none of this implies a totalitarian state, or even a state with any power beyond that to ultimately determine who is friend and who is enemy. Yes, if it lacks that latter power, it is not a "unified political entity," and in fact "the political entity is nonexistent." But any number of other powers and considerations can, and should, exist within the political entity, which constrain political action.

The omnipotent state perceived as the norm by moderns, as Schmitt earlier pointed out in *Political Theology*, is merely a "superficial secularization of theological formulas of the omnipotence of God," not a necessary, or even serious, political analysis. The state, however, is assuredly not pluralist, composed of many different entities wearing different hats at different times. That would be "nothing else than a revocable service for individuals and their free associations." Rather, the state is an entity, and its key characteristic is deciding on the friend-enemy distinction, thereby "transcend[ing] the mere societal-associational groupings." (All this is, of course, in line with Foundationalism's call for a state of limited ends, but unlimited means to those ends.)

War is certainly not to be encouraged; Schmitt was not one of those who think that war is healthy or necessary for a strong society. But war

will come, sometimes. "War 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." However, it is extremely important for Schmitt, and for us, that the modern liberal state, with its claims of the primacy of individualism and the dominance of economics, falls perilously close to being unable to justifiably call for war. Therefore there is something close to illegitimacy, close to political nonexistence, in the character of the modern liberal state. All that can justify killing is "an existential threat to one's own way of life," not a higher GDP. "To demand seriously of human beings that they kill others and be prepared to die themselves so that trade and industry may flourish for the survivors or that the purchasing power of grandchildren may grow is sinister and crazy."

If a people living under liberalism cannot make the decision for war, by implication because they have no common way of life and thus have no common enemy, then the political entity of that people, the state, no longer actually exists. This suggests that any state overly enriched by diversity, such as modern America, is not really a political entity. We should not shrink from recognizing as the core matter Schmitt's reference to "one's own way of life," which defines who is friend, for whom one would be willing to die. For all of us Americans today, this is not everyone in our society, because those who rule would gladly destroy, and are already doing their best to destroy, the way of life of many, if not most, Americans. Thus, Schmitt helps us realize that too much diversity of the wrong sort, can, in the extreme circumstance, not only justify, but also warrant, war—and in a way is the only legitimate justification for war.

This leads to an inevitable logical chain. The enemy of a collectivity can be anywhere, but a key distinction for Schmitt is whether that enemy is outside a nation's borders, or inside. In the usual course, the state represents a people's decisions with respect to the friend-enemy distinction, with regard to enemies located outside the borders of that state. But if "internal antagonisms" become excessive, if "domestic conflicts among political parties have become the sole political difference," "the most extreme degree of internal political tension is thereby reached; i.e., the domestic, not the foreign friend-and-enemy groupings

are decisive for armed conflict.” That is, civil war. We might call this conclusion the “*Highlander principle*”—there can be only one, in this case only one collectivity inside a nation, and somehow or other, this must be decided (which, of course, leads into Schmitt’s other writings on sovereignty and decisionism).

Short of civil war, Schmitt focuses on the need for the state to maintain internal peace, and the necessity to that end for the state to determine the internal enemy. If there is not internal peace, then no legal norm is valid, and there is, ultimately, again no state but rather an unstable situation of civil strife (what the Greeks called *stasis*). He ignores the possibility that the state itself could engage in anarcho-tyranny, or rather in a throwback to old-fashioned factionalism exercised by violence, as exemplified by the state-sponsored and state-protected Floyd Riots. At first reflection, I assumed that Schmitt ignored this possibility because it was probably incomprehensible to him in the *jus publicum europaeum* tradition that a state would so abdicate its responsibility. But that’s clearly wrong—it had only been a few years since elements of the German state had also done exactly that, in the spasms of violence across Germany that followed World War I. Probably Schmitt just wanted to approach the topic abstractly, rather than emotionally. For us, however, it is important to see that our current state, most notably in, but hardly limited to, the terroristic actions (and inactions) of the so-called Department of Justice that are designed to achieve precisely the opposite of internal peace, has declared its enemy. All that is happening now, unfortunately, is positioning the pieces until the starter’s pistol sends up a puff of smoke.

Schmitt being Schmitt, he adds more swipes at liberalism (something he associated with parliamentarianism, and distinguished from democracy in his *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*—not that he had any truck with democracy either). Individual rights, a core focus of liberalism, are far less important than the rights of, and survival of, the group. Political romanticism, the endless conversation which typifies liberalism (the topic of another whole Schmitt book), is an attempt to avoid reality. Both are distractions from the core of politics. “Although liberalism has not radically denied the state, it has, on the other hand, neither advanced a positive theory of the state nor on its own discovered how to reform the state, but has attempted only to tie the political to the

ethical and to subjugate it to economics. It has produced a doctrine of the separation and balance of powers, i.e., a system of checks and controls of state and government. This cannot be characterized as either a theory of state or a basic political principle." Liberalism offers only a critique of politics, not a form of politics, because it denies the friend-enemy distinction, instead offering only feeble and second-order attempts to control the state, dissipating its energies focusing on economics and ethics, while at the same time inviting the politicization of everything (which leads effectively to totalitarianism). Regardless, it is all fake, in a sense—Schmitt says that even a state focusing on economics will inevitably turn to distinctions based on friend and enemy that will lead to war. This certainly seems to be the arc of Western so-called liberal democracies, or at least of the regimes that run them, proving Schmitt correct once again.

A related topic, again central to today, that Schmitt also directly addresses is how wars can unnecessarily become ideologized and totalized—something that reached a fever pitch only a few years after he wrote, in World War II, but has been true of all Western wars since. Schmitt (both here and in other works) is highly critical of the denial of humanity to one's enemies which flows from ideology that tries to deny the reality of the friend-enemy distinction, because this inevitably leads to far more dreadful wars. "Such a war is necessarily unusually intense and inhuman because, by transcending the limits of the political framework, it simultaneously degrades the enemy into moral and other categories and is forced to make of him a monster that must not only be defeated but also utterly destroyed. In other words, he is an enemy who no longer must be compelled to retreat into his borders only."

"When a state fights its political enemy in the name of humanity, it is not a war for the sake of humanity, but a war wherein a particular state seeks to usurp a universal concept against its military opponent. At the expense of its opponent, it tries to identify itself with humanity in the same way as one can misuse peace, justice, progress, and civilization in order to claim these as one's own and to deny the same to the enemy." "There always are concrete human groupings which fight other concrete human groupings in the name of justice, humanity, order, or peace. When being reproached for immorality and cynicism, the spectator of

political phenomena can always recognize in such reproaches a political weapon used in actual combat.”

In later works, Schmitt specifically identified this tendency as inherent to liberalism, because of its false pretense to moral superiority. A shining example is the American regime’s current unhinged participation in the Russo-Ukrainian war. Our supposed leaders in the West refuse to acknowledge, or even consider, what type of friend-enemy distinctions might underlie the conflict, and how they might be resolved by negotiation. Instead, we get cant about humanity (only in complaint about Russian behavior, never about Ukrainian), and (unrealistic, to say the least) demands for unconditional Russian surrender and the transformation of Russia into a demilitarized satrapy of globohomo. We certainly get no consideration of whether the war threatens our way of life, justifying American participation in the war (not that we have, as already noted, any commonality in way of life in America today).

Some argue there is an imperialist American motive, related to the regime’s desire to impose globohomo, also involved in the Russo-Ukrainian war. I’ll discuss this in a forthcoming piece, in the context of what this says about regime fragility, but Schmitt saw such a motive as part of the same tendency inherent in liberalism. “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. . . . To confiscate the word humanity, to invoke and monopolize such a term probably has certain incalculable effects, such as denying the enemy the quality of being human and declaring him to be an outlaw of humanity; and a war can thereby be driven to the most extreme inhumanity.” To the same point, Schmitt summarizes Hobbes, who “recognized correctly that the conviction of each side that it possesses the truth, the good, and the just bring about the worst enmities, finally the war of all against all.” The result, however, is the same—wars of immense destruction.

In yet another topic with direct application to today, Schmitt is very focused on what happens if the state and society become so intertwined as to make it impossible to determine where one ends and the other begins, which he believes necessarily occurs in a democracy. In that case, “Heretofore ostensibly neutral domains—religion, culture, education, the economy—then cease to be neutral in the sense that they do not

pertain to state and to politics.” “[D]esignating the adversary as political and oneself as nonpolitical (i.e., scientific, just, objective, neutral, etc.) is in actuality a typical and unusually intensive way of pursuing politics.” He returns to variations on this theme throughout the book. At least in part, this helps us understand why the Left politicizes everything. In their troglodyte way, they have a sub-rational grasp of Schmitt’s core point. No better recent example exists than the Left reaction to the Wuhan Plague, where political ends of control (and harm to one’s enemies, as in the expelling from the military of those who refused the Devil’s Shot, who were perceived as likely to also be otherwise disloyal to the regime) were justified, with obvious mendacity, as “scientific, just, objective, neutral.” But once again, our response should not be to demonstrate the mendacity; that is a pointless exercise, like fighting a hologram, where the real enemy is far away behind tall walls, and cannot be dealt with by persuasion.

Finally, switching gears, let’s focus on the key difference between public enemy and private enemy, which is simple within Schmitt’s framework, but which causes a great deal of confusion, much of it deliberately caused, for modern Christians. English (and German) do not have separate words for the two concepts. However, Latin, and perhaps more importantly, Greek, do. In Latin, the two words are *hostis*, for public enemy, and *inimicus*, for private enemy. (The latter is derived from *in*, meaning not, and *amicus*, friend, thus “not friend”—sometimes the English word “foe” is used to translate *inimicus*, though that does not really convey any change in meaning). It is fascinating to me that this distinction appears to have received very little attention from scholars. Almost all searches for the topic simply point back to Schmitt.

He traces the origin of the distinction to Book V of Plato’s *Republic* (though Plato was relatively narrowly focused on the distinction between wars among Greeks and wars with barbarians). He then cites the eighteenth-century Italian language specialist Egidio Forcellini, who wrote a massive Latin lexicon regarded as the standard reference, for the core of the distinction: “A public enemy (*hostis*) is one with whom we are at war publicly. . . . In this respect he differs from a private enemy [*inimicus*]. He is a person with whom we have private quarrels. They may be distinguished as follows: a private enemy is a person who hates us, whereas a public enemy is a person who fights against us.”

Crucially, an individual cannot stand in a *hostis* relationship to another individual. He can only do so as part of a collective facing another collective. Moreover, it is not only war, or mostly war, in which the public enemy may be involved—competition in sports, for example, is a *hostis* relationship. One can be friends with, even love, someone who falls within the ambit of *hostis*. Even in total opposition, hate is largely or wholly irrelevant to the public enemy; quarrels with public enemies revolve around zero-sum conflicts that can only be resolved through a contest to decide the matter. They do not revolve around personal conflicts which demand satisfaction through some negative effect on the opponent. Human nature being human nature, an individual regarding someone designated *hostis* will bear emotions in connection with that designation, and those emotions may be hard to distinguish from emotions relating to personal enemies, *inimici*. Still, to the point, it is key for Christians that while one can fight both *hostis* and *inimicus*, it is the only the latter that is, by nature, hated.

Because of the lack of distinction in English, the translations of the New Testament we use erase this essential distinction between *hostis* and *inimicus*. Public enemies are not in the least a concern of the Gospels; no variation of the word *hostis* appears anywhere in the New Testament in the Vulgate. Where the complication arises is that modern Christians, in the West at least, are very strongly catechized with respect to Christ's injunctions regarding enemies. Probably the most well-known such injunction is Matthew 5:43–44. "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use and persecute you." (A similar, somewhat longer, passage occurs in Luke 6.) The word used here is exclusively *inimicus*, the enemy whom one can hate, and presumably (though I have not checked) originally the equivalent word in Greek.

You might think that this distinction would an important exegetical matter. Yet I have been unable to find anything in the Fathers of the Church on the matter of our duties with respect to public enemies, and only a little that expands on the Biblical injunctions regarding personal enemies. Saint Thomas Aquinas, in his discussion in the *Summa Theologicae* "Whether We Ought to Pray for Our Enemies?" (II-II, q. 83, a.8), exclusively uses the word *inimicus*, but appears to never address

hostis anywhere. The most obvious conclusion (though perhaps a scholar reader of mine can shed light on the matter) is that there is little exegesis on the topic because the distinction was so obvious to everyone before modernity, and nobody would have tried to tie Christ's commands to public enemies. As Schmitt says, "Never in the thousand-year struggle between Christians and Moslems did it occur to a Christian to surrender rather than defend Europe out of love toward the Saracens or Turks. . . . [Christ's command] certainly does not mean that one should love and support the enemies of one's own people." This seems obvious to any objective observer. Yet it also seems to me that conclusion sits somewhat uneasily with that until the millennium, pacifism was the default position of most, if not all, Christian theologians, and such pacifism must have been with regard to public enemies, *hostis*. One would have to study the origin of such calls for pacifism to see if the arguments made alter this analysis.

In any case, this matters because Christ's injunctions regarding enemies are often today deliberately conflated with the Golden Rule, and with the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself, in order to use the fictional hybrid commandment as a political weapon. The purpose of this weapon is for the Left, and their fifth columnists (such as David French) within the Right, to demand that anyone on the Right accede to all Left demands. Refusing to do so is cast as "hate" which fails to "love," a violation of what we might call the False Commandment, that we must never recognize or react forcefully to the public enemy, even when great evil is being done.

But this is a lie, and it seems obvious it would have been laughed out of the room until very recently. Totally aside from *hostis*, Aquinas says, using the term *inimicus*, that "It is lawful to attack one's enemies, that they may be restrained from sin: and this is for their own good and for the good of others. Consequently it is even lawful in praying to ask that temporal evils be inflicted on our enemies in order that they may mend their ways." In fact, we are commanded to have enemies, even in the sense of *inimicus*, to the extent that their behavior is sinful. And that we have enemies, in the sense of *hostis*, has no Christian moral component at all (although our specific actions taken with respect to those enemies certainly can, if they implicate other commandments). Schmitt would no doubt agree, but as usual he says nothing specifically about morality.

Let's take a practical application of the *hostis/inimicus* distinction. During the Floyd Riots, a local Catholic priest was criticized, and punished by his cowardly bishop, for accurately referring to BLM as "maggots and parasites." Our Left-conditioned first response is that a priest shouldn't use mean language to describe others, and that if he does, he thereby sins against neighbor, against charity. But that's incorrect. He sins only against the False Commandment, which is no commandment at all.

There can be no doubt that BLM, and anyone who willingly and knowingly associates with or aids BLM or any allied group or entity, is *hostis* to all decent Americans, and should be treated in all circumstances as such, by all in our collectivity. In fact, priests should lead this response, using strong language as necessary to stir the people to virtuous actions to defeat the public enemy. Those who lead BLM, who organized the Floyd Riots, together with the collectivity of BLM and its supporters, desire to "negate [our] way of life and therefore must be repulsed or fought in order to preserve one's own form of existence." If given a chance, they would treat each of us as they treated the heroic Kyle Rittenhouse. Any person who knowingly supports BLM is our enemy, *hostis*, which means he should not be permitted to live in my society, in my state. When a priest implies this, he is merely recognizing reality.

Many other examples of this division, this reification of the political, exist in today's America. To take just one other, demands for open borders (especially where they mean importing wholly alien invaders, such as the Muslim Africans flooding into towns across America) are not charity and they are not dictated by Christian love. They are an attempt by our enemies to destroy our collectivity, and therefore anyone who demands open borders should be regarded as *hostis*, to be opposed by all means necessary.

And, to close with Schmitt (sadly, I have gone on long enough, and we do not have space to cover Schmitt's extra article, "The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations," which has many insights about technology, or Leo Strauss's responses to Schmitt), the foregoing can be multiplied across the entire front of political division today. We have long passed the point where the bones of contention were such items as marginal tax rates and minor adjustments to trade policy, in which regard neither *hostis* nor *inimicus* can legitimately be invoked,

and arguments could take place within a general American collectivity. Whether we like it or not, Schmitt tells us that the logic of the political, of the essential enmity that exists between two counterpoised collectives, between us and those who do evil or seek to negate our way of life, will, short of a peaceful solution such as geographic separation, ultimately end in war.