Enmity, War, Intensity

Norberto Bobbio once gave a minimal definition of politics, characterizing it as the activity of aggregating and defending our friends, and dispersing and fighting our enemies. We know that the instigator of this definition is Carl Schmitt, although his critics have often misunderstood the reference to enmity. What resonates most is the claim that friend-enemy oppositions constitute the basic code of the political and that such oppositions can lead to the extreme case of war. This might explain why part of the debate on The Concept of the Political has revolved around the status of the enemy and on whether Schmitt aestheticizes violence and ultimately glorifies war and death. His would be a bellicose thought, contrary to the pluralistic and democratic political ethos dominant in the West.

There is some truth to this charge, as there is with the suspicion that for him the true subject of politics is the state. Schmitt tries to avoid subsuming the conflictive reality of the political under the aegis of war by positing the latter as a precondition and real possibility of the former. Yet, he singles out friend-enemy oppositions as the most intense, because they alone are capable of escalating into war. If economic, ethnic, or other oppositions lead to war, it is because they have already ceased to be merely economic, ethnic, etc. and have become political by virtue of acquiring the necessary intensity to group people as friends and enemies.

Jacques Derrida has shown that Schmitt’s focus on intensity introduces an unexpected telos into his concept of the political: war turns out to


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be the essence and not the precondition of the political.² This is because if one places absolute peace or complete absence of conflict at one end of the spectrum and war at the other, the intensity of an opposition will increase as we move away from peace. Political oppositions—those structured around the friend-enemy relation—are unthinkable in the case of zero conflict, because then there would be no enmity and therefore no possibility of grouping people as friends or enemies. Yet, once you move away from pure stasis, the political can be anywhere in the scale of intensity. The problem is that economic, ethnic, religious, and other oppositions will be part of that spectrum too, so what is it that makes political oppositions so special? Schmitt simply affirms that they are the most intense of all. But the measurement of intensity is notoriously tricky, and if the intensity—and therefore the political nature—of an opposition increases as it moves closer to war, then war would turn out to be the quintessence rather than the extreme or exceptional manifestation of the political. This, of course, contradicts Schmitt’s desire to avoid conflating the political and war. The simplest solution is to keep war as a real possibility—as the most extreme possibility—and drop the criterion of intensity as a means to distinguish political oppositions from others.

A second way of dealing with this is to examine what Schmitt might mean by war. It is obvious that he is thinking of it in the strict sense of confrontations that involve the loss of life: the enemy poses an existential threat, and this authorizes us to fight and kill him for political reasons.³ This is partly because he draws his inspiration from the Westphalian state system, where politics was the high politics of interstate affairs and war was a regular fixture. But we know that Schmitt understands the possibility of war as a presupposition of the political and not as its content or its aim, and he defines the political enemy as hostis rather than inimicus.⁴ The focus on the mutual hostility at work in political oppositions is useful in that it allows us to speak of a double link between war and the political: war is the extreme manifestation of a hostile disposition, but hostility may or may not lead to actual battles and the concomitant spilling of blood. This might be a peculiar way of looking at war, but on scrutiny it is not

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⁴ Ibid., p. 34.
particularly unusual. One can trace it back to a passage in *Leviathan*, where Hobbes says that “Warre consisteth not in Battell only, or the act of fighting, but in a tract of time, wherein the Will to contend by Battell is sufficiently known. . . . So the nature of War, consisteth not in actual fighting; but in the known disposition thereto, during all the time there is no assurance to the contrary.” War, then, refers to actual battles *as well as* to the lack of assurances that our adversaries will not attack or try to harm us in some way. Without the possibility of understanding war in this second sense, as a *disposition* to fight, how could we account for something like the Cold War, which pitted adversaries against one another without their armies ever actually shooting at each other? So, even when killing and dying remain within the structure of possibilities of the political, there are political “combats” where friends and enemies size each other up without a drop of blood being shed.

The possibility of a war without killing, or, more precisely, the absence of a causal relation between the disposition to fight and the physical elimination of adversaries, is important because it extends the scope of Schmitt’s reflection on the political. It makes it easier to unlock it from the domain of interstate relations—which is where he thought it made most sense—and apply it to the domestic scene of friend-enemy oppositions, without necessarily leading to civil war or denying the decision-making force of the state, as he feared it would. I will say more on this later.

A third way of deflecting the criticism and bypassing the complicity between war and politics consists of going along with Chantal Mouffe and sanitizing Schmitt by morphing antagonism into agonism and transforming enemies who must be destroyed into adversaries to be confronted. This would suspend the reference to war and make the Schmittian concept of the political fit for thinking legitimate dissent and politics in democratic polities—particularly liberal ones—where her “agonistic pluralism” is supposed to rule. Mouffe’s normative assumption about the types of


enmity and conflict compatible with pluralist democracy has its merits, and there are many who are happy to endorse it. Yet, it is not very convincing or particularly useful.

There are two reasons for this, or perhaps even three if we were to press Mouffe by asking her how this will occur, how does she envision the actual process of transforming enemies into adversaries and antagonism into agonism without having to appeal to a universal voluntary agreement, an authoritative imposition, or a Kantian regulative idea like the one informing Habermas’s communicative ethics. But I am more interested in other problems. One is that the proposal to move from enemy to adversary is not a true innovation, because Schmitt himself tried to extricate his concept of enmity from war—not always successfully, as we have just seen—by distinguishing the political enemy from the deadly foe. He fine-tunes the distinction in *Theory of the Partisan* by specifying three types of enemies—conventional, real, and absolute—and by arguing that only the third one falls outside his criterion of the political. This is because the absolute enemy knows of no limitation and thus has absolute war as its correlate, whereas Schmitt takes the relativized enmity of the *jus publicum Europaeum* as the model for his political enemy. This is a way of avoiding liberal” (*The Challenge of Carl Schmitt*, p. 5), “enemy” is a category restricted “to those who do not accept the democratic ‘rules of the game’ and thereby exclude themselves from the political community” (*The Return of the Political*, p. 4), and antagonism is a frontal struggle between enemies who have no common symbolic ground between them (*The Challenge of Carl Schmitt*, pp. 4–5). Enmity and antagonism are therefore inappropriate for pluralist democracy, so taking on Schmitt’s challenge means transforming antagonism into agonism (*The Challenge of Carl Schmitt*, p. 5) and enemies into adversaries who adhere to the principles of liberal democracy. Yet she is ambiguous about antagonism. Sometimes it is a quasi-transcendental condition of possibility and impossibility for the realization of democracy (*The Return of the Political*, p. 8), so it is hard to see how or why one could transform it into agonism without destroying its quasi-transcendental status. On other occasions, Mouffe sees it as an ontological component of politics that can be diffused but not eradicated; but she is not always consistent about this, because she also speaks of the “antagonistic potential present in human relations” (*The Challenge of Carl Schmitt*, p. 4, my emphasis). If antagonism could happen or not, then it is not a fixture but a simple possibility of politics. For a lucid critique of Mouffe’s agonistic pluralism from another angle, see John Dryzek, “Deliberative Democracy in Divided Societies: An Alternative to Agonism and Analgesia,” *Political Theory* 33:2 (2005): 220–22.

the semantic overlap between war and the political or of reducing the latter to killing and dying. It involves a claim about what kind of enemy is acceptable and brings Schmitt’s understanding of the enemy close to Mouffe’s adversary, as long as the latter does not turn into a mere competitor in the market or a discussant in intellectual matters.

The second problem in Mouffe’s reading of Schmitt is that it overlooks the fact that identifying an opponent that is neither a competitor nor a discussant was not Schmitt’s last word on the political. It was only its normative aspect: groups must distinguish their friends from their enemies in order to count as political entities. This is perfectly meaningless for Schmitt without the existential angle, for a group that identifies its adversaries and is not prepared to confront them in some way is not a political group at all. People might nod approvingly whenever someone says that we must draw the line in the case of racism. It is the right thing to say and do. Doing, however, happens to be more relevant than saying, because it poses the question of whether something will follow from a principled stance against racism. If those who claim to oppose racism fail to speak up when confronted by it, one may conclude that they have a morally and ethically decent view of things but not that they are political in the Schmittian sense of the word. Without putting existential risk into the equation—that is, without the willingness to engage opponents and the awareness that doing so might put one in harm’s way—Mouffe’s call to replace enemies with adversaries and antagonism with agonism is a flawed solution. This is not because “existential risk” applies to matters of life and death alone, for if it did, war is once again the truth of the political and the entire effort to avoid the conflation of war and the political is pointless. The sociological recasting of late modernity as “risk society”—as in the work of Ulrich Beck—shows that risk entails the possibility of harm that might or might not lead to a loss of life.10 I mentioned something about this in the discussion of hostility and the Hobbesian take on war. Whether in its restricted or more extended sense, existential risk is ineradicable from the political and irreducible to its normative aspect.

We then have three possible lines of flight from a bellicose account of the political: dropping the intensity criterion, seeing war as a disposition to


fight and not simply as an actual battle, and, less satisfactorily, transforming enemies into adversaries and opting for a normative criterion without an existential supplement. None of these can fully dispel the fear of a purely adversarial politics and of worrisome links between enmity and war-like scenarios found in Schmitt’s theory of politics. This is because war remains an extreme case of the political and is therefore part of the structure of possibilities of the latter. But in the absence of a causal link between the possibility and the actuality of war, the switch from one to the other is not governed by a principle of necessity. We can have enmity without war, in which case Schmitt’s account offers us at least a referential criterion—“a theoretical framework for an incommensurable problem”11 and not an exhaustive account, as he himself warned—of what passes for politics with and without the spilling of blood.

It is worth noticing that the friend-enemy distinction bears the traces of a rather productive paradox with regard to political friendship. It is that the same oppositions that pit groups against each other also contribute to unite a collectivity. On the one hand, the separation of people into camps of “us” and “them” brings them together, even if only to confront each other, to cut a deal to reduce tensions, or to settle their controversies. On the other hand, divisions generate communities of friends that did not exist prior to the designation of adversaries and the willingness to confront them. A clear enemy can give a sense of political purpose to an assortment of states, parties, or movements, and, conversely, the loss of such enemy might weaken the understanding of who they are and what they are fighting for.

One simply needs to recall the disorientation among Western states in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Bloc. They experienced relief and elation after its chief enemy for most of the twentieth century simply disbanded, but they also came to realize that what held them together as a community of purpose was partly fear of their adversary. The military and political alliance NATO created to counteract the threat of the Warsaw Pact longed for a well-defined enemy to recast its identity and sense of mission. Things only began to change when a somewhat Hobbesian ideology of security took hold of governmental reasoning and public opinion after 9/11. This tells us that the moment of

victory—assuming that victory is the right word here—can be as lonely and disheartening as the Hegelian “loss of the loss,” which Slavoj Žižek depicts as “the experience that we never had what we were supposed to have lost.”12 What we never had—what we can never have—is a positive or purely self-referential political identity blossoming in the absence of an enemy. Enemies are our pharmakon; they alternate between being poison and cure, a threat to our way of life (or, less dramatically, an obstacle to our will to power) and something that helps us to become what we are. Henry Staten has a name for such a paradoxical outside that partakes in the configuration of the inside: he calls it a constitutive outside.13 That is why enemies are not a pure and simple moment of negativity; they function as a constitutive outside by endangering our identity and nonetheless making up one of its conditions of possibility. Former U.S. President Bill Clinton spelled it out in more practical terms by saying: “The painful lesson is that you define yourself by who you fight” (as quoted in Bob Woodward’s The Agenda). For Schmitt too, politics is all about how you define yourself in the face of a friend-enemy grouping.

The Double Inscription and the Never-ending History of Political Forms

We can now move on to explore other possibilities that arise from Schmitt’s thought and bring him closer to contemporary critiques of liberalism and to the strategic concerns of post-foundational perspectives. The very first sentence of The Concept of the Political is symptomatic of this proximity. In saying that “[t]he concept of the state presupposes the concept of the political,” Schmitt is not so much establishing the causal precedence of the political as its excessiveness in relation to the state. Rather, he is advancing a claim that in a way mirrors the ontological difference in Heidegger and brings to mind Claude Lefort’s claim that we should not confuse the political with its historical modes of appearance.14 This, in turn, dovetails with Nietzsche’s affirmation of the excess of becoming over being, which Eugen Fink describes as “negative ontology”: there are no things in themselves


since “thingness,” or being, consists of a temporary domestication of the endless flow of becoming. Similarly, the political in Schmitt will always be excessive vis-à-vis its concrete manifestations, as no particular sphere and no historical form of politics will ever exhaust friend-enemy oppositions. This runs counter to the efforts of mainstream liberal-democratic thought to enclose the political within the bounds of state institutions and political parties. One can draw from Schmitt in order to expose this as either ideological or reductionist.

The opening line of *The Concept of the Political* also encapsulates the celebrated distinction between *politics* and the *political* that I have introduced without pausing to discuss it in any detail. Schmitt uses politics as a noun to indicate the institutional location of politics. It can refer to the state, as in the case of absolutism and the Westphalian state system generally, or to “the political sphere” or “political sub-system,” expressions used to designate the statutory site of politics in liberal democracies. In contrast, the definite article denotes the nounal or substantivized form of the adjective “political,” which Schmitt uses to describe a class of phenomena independently of their location.

The theorization of the “political” and how it overflows from politics is Schmitt’s key innovation. Like Lefort, he refuses to tie down the political to a particular sector of life; liberalism, in contrast, has no problem in speaking of various autonomous spheres of activity. Yet, the “political” in Schmitt differs from the way Lefort conceives *le politique*, because Schmitt does not see it as the principle or set of principles that shape society or perform its *mise-en-forme* but as a type of relationship in which groups connect with one another as friends or enemies. Unlike politics, which has a proper place in the political system or sub-system, the political is improper because it lacks a space of its own and in principle can appear anywhere. For Schmitt, the political is unconcerned about the type of actors, the object of dispute, the nature of the struggle, or the terrain of confrontation, and is furthermore insensitive to the democratic or authoritarian orientation of a given opposition. It does not matter much if those who carry out what Bobbio calls the activity of aggregating friends and dispersing enemies are political parties, social movements, interest groups, or sovereign states. It is unimportant if the activity revolves around elected positions or the control of territory, or if it takes place

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within the institutional setting of the political system or in more informal spaces outside this setting. All that counts for Schmitt is that people group themselves as friends to face designated enemies. The definition does not raise the question of scope either, of whether these constellations presuppose an all-encompassing totality or can occur in the discontinuous spaces of a political microphysics, even when he would like it to apply solely to sovereign states and therefore conventional political totalities. Schmitt also takes for granted that our friends might eventually become enemies, and vice-versa, so the actual contours of the political are inevitably mobile as they follow the changing fortunes of friend-enemy oppositions. Moreover, he wishes to strip the political of an origin and a telos, to sever all links to a model as well as to any presumed laws of motion of politics, and to position political activity firmly in the terrain of contingency. So, contrary to the credo of the end of history, Schmitt’s double bind, like Lefort’s, indicates that the relation between the political and politics will be played out to infinity and will prevent the former from being hijacked by a particular form of the latter.

Two relatively straightforward conclusions follow from this. One is that the specificity of the political does not refer to the constitution of a new autonomous domain but to a type of relation—the friend-enemy relation—that can arise anywhere. The other is that politics and the political are two registers of political matter: they coexist and intertwine, but they are irreducible to one or the other. Schmitt returns to this distinction many years after the publication of *The Concept of the Political*. In the preface to the Italian edition, he writes:

The classical profile of the state vanished when its monopoly on politics decreased and a diversity of new subjects entered political struggle with or without reference to the state, with or without a “statal” content [*Staatsgehabe*]. This marks the emergence of a new phase for political thought. People began to distinguish politics from the “political,” and the issue of new bearers and new subjects of political reality gradually becomes the central theme of the entire complex problematic of the “political.” This is both the starting point and the meaning of all the efforts to distinguish the multiple new subjects of the “political” that become active in the political reality of politics, whether it is statal reality or not, originating new types of “friend-enemy” groupings. . . . Our question concerning the new subjects of politics—whether statal or otherwise—remains: the criterion of the “political” that I have outlined—the distinction between
friends and enemies—is indeed an approach [Ansatz] that acknowledges this political reality.\textsuperscript{16}

Schmitt obviously overplays the novelty of this phase, as the distinction between politics and the political holds in the case of the absolutist state, too, albeit indirectly. One can see this in his own writings. He claims that in the classical European states there was an identification between “statal” and “political,” as only the state could make political decisions—basically, whether to treat other states as friends or enemies, or to remain neutral in conflicts between other states. The political—with its divisions and oppositions—was banished from the domestic scene, because actors below the governmental level were denied the possibility of identifying their enemies; only the state had the authority to make the sovereign decision on this matter. Conflicts among domestic actors—palace intrigues, conspiracies, the rebellions of the discontent—were simply a matter of public order and classified as “disturbances” to be dealt with by the police.\textsuperscript{17} Schmitt admits that these were sometimes called “political,” but he is unhappy to apply that label to them. This hesitation is a symptom of another tension in his thought. Derrida identifies it very well. He says that Schmitt oscillates between the desire for conceptual purity and the awareness of the contested status of political concepts.\textsuperscript{18} That is, he wants a clear-cut distinction between political and non-political (or war and peace, combatant and civilian, public and private, and so on) while insisting that political concepts are polemical, so their actual valence is up for grabs and therefore cannot aspire to discursive purity. Schmitt cannot have it both ways.

The point is not to force a choice between these alternatives or to look for a consensual middle ground between them but to show how the tension plays out in Schmitt’s reticence to accept the persistence of the political in the pacified order of the absolutist state. Rebellions, conspiracies, and other disturbances might not be “political” in the strict Schmittian sense of the term, but they are traces of the political that remind us that the given is always exposed to challenges because it is never fully given or given


\textsuperscript{18} Derrida, Politics of Friendship, pp. 113–17.
definitively. It does not really matter if these disturbances constitute the return of the repressed or a proof of the failure of the absolutist project to fulfill its own promise of a fully pacified domestic domain. What counts is that palace intrigues and rebellions contradict the presumed effacement of the political. The corollary is clear: absolutism is a format of politics that wishes to circumscribe the political to friend-enemy relations amongst states, but only manages to hegemonize it because it fails to banish those relations from the domestic scene.

This excess of the political over politics gives us an angle to introduce the theme of the double bind or double inscription mentioned by Žižek. In his reading of Lefort—the argument also applies to Schmitt—the political dimension is doubly inscribed; it is both “a moment of the social Whole, one among its sub-systems, and the very terrain in which the Whole is decided—in which the new Pact is designed and concluded.”9 We should be cautious about this reference to a capitalized “Whole,” because it suggests a strong notion of totality at odds with the double inscription. Objectivity is a better term. Hence one may simply say that the political is inscribed as a gentrified domain of normalized or institutional political exchanges (politics) and as the negativity of decisions and actions that put objectivity into question (the political), whether at the local or macro levels, within or outside the political sub-system.

There are, however, two potential misunderstandings about the double inscription. One is the temptation to model the relation between politics and the political around something like a Hobbesian distinction between the civil state and the state of nature, respectively, as if the terms faced each other in a relation of pure and simple exteriority. There would then be a good politics that takes place in its designated or proper space of appearance and a disruptive or improper politics of the political that threatens—or could threaten—the civility of the instituted order. The other misunderstanding is the assimilation of politics and the political to the standard distinction that political scientists make between mainstream and alternative politics. We would then have something like a political politics of the establishment and a politics of the political of radicals who cannot operate successfully in the mainstream or who dislike the idea of doing so. Both views are misleading. Politics and the political interpenetrate because there is a double coding, not two alternative codes or modes of inscription.

Most of the arguments about the interpenetration of politics and the political refer to how the “political” is present in “politics.” This is what Žižek tries to do when he speaks of the double inscription. We must show that the reciprocal is true, too. Let me first examine how the negativity of the political remains lodged in the bounded political sphere or gentrified space of politics. Exchanges within institutional settings have very little in common with the embellished image of a debating society, where the best argument wins the day and the rules remain untouched by the discussion. Quite the contrary, they put objectivity to the test quite regularly; constituted power retains a constituent capacity because the political sphere is a site where negativity—the disruption of the given and the possibility of founding it again—has not been neutralized or banished but simply gentrified. This is not an oblique reference to Giorgio Agamben’s interpretation of the Schmittian state of exception as a zone of indistinction between constituent and constituted power. I have something much more mundane in mind, namely, that legislators change laws and amend the constitution or even create one anew, a vote of no confidence brings the government down, citizens engage in civil disobedience by refusing to comply with a law, conflicts between the executive and legislative branches can paralyze the business of government, and so forth. That is partly why Michel Foucault can speak of politics as the continuation of war by other means and why Žižek says that negativity is not an exception in the passage from one positivity or normality to another but rather that normality itself is “the aftermath, the ‘gentrification’ of a forgotten excess of negativity.”

If we now turn our attention to the political, we will see that politics also intertangles with it. We can interpret Schmitt’s contention that the political is the fundamental status of man as a claim about human nature, in which case the political has an ontological status and is impervious to modification or contamination by an ontic register of politics. But this need not be the case, or at least it doesn’t have to be only that. I can think of two ways of conceiving the presence of politics in the political, or of claiming that the negativity of the political is not only negativity. One is outlined by Schmitt when he says that the absolute or unlimited enemy falls out of his notion of the political. The enemy is a legitimate, even a

limited adversary in a combat, in which case the enemy is different but not wholly different: it is simply another fighting collectivity and thus also similar to us.\(^\text{21}\) And he also tells us that a foreign enemy is not a criminal. This is why wars can be limited and circumscribed through international law and can end with a peace treaty that often includes a clause guaranteeing the amnesty of the defeated or at least their protection from abuse by the victors—even if the latter often disregard such niceties in the way they treat the vanquished armies and the civilian population of the conquered countries.\(^\text{22}\) These references to the recognition of similarities with the adversary, the construction of enmity in international law, and, broadly speaking, the refusal to confuse political enemies with absolute or deadly foes confirm that the “political” is never in a pure *status naturalis* or that its nature is always already partly *civilis*.

There is a second way of identifying the traces of politics in the political. It revolves around the very idea of the political as the possibility of grouping people according to whether they are friends or enemies. The keyword is “grouping,” the activity of bringing together a friendly “us” and identifying those who will be treated as our adversaries, which immediately tells us that the two poles of the political distinction must be constructed and that both are bound to change continuously.\(^\text{23}\) This dynamics of creation and transformation is unthinkable without symbolic and other forms of exchange. Bonds of friendship develop over time and involve culturally mediated relations of reciprocity, the investment of affects, the specification of interests, reaching agreements, honoring obligations, and entering into polemics about how to do all this. Similarly, identifying an enemy requires all sorts of representations to persuade people to treat another group as such and rally against it if needed. Those who partake in friend-enemy oppositions outside the gentrified space of the political sphere—like those involving social movements, trade unions, or guerrillas—and even

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23. This parallels what Andreas Kalyvas says about the constituent sovereign in “Popular Sovereignty, Democracy, and the Constituent Power,” *Constellations* 12:2 (2005), namely, that “the constituent power points at the collective, intersubjective and impersonal attributes of sovereignty, at its cooperative, public dimension.” By reminding us that *constituer* or to constitute means to create jointly, he is implying that sovereign power is not an ontological category emerging from a metaphysical ether but is instead the outcome of cooperative efforts not unlike those involved in crafting political friendships.
as cross-border actors and coalitions often appeal to a discourse of rights by invoking the rights of citizens, the universality of human rights, or the Arendtian “right to have rights.” If all these symbolic, cultural, legal, and practical codes permeate the political, then the conclusion is quite obvious: conventions and institutions contaminate friend-enemy oppositions, even when these take place outside their “proper” or designated spaces of appearance.

Schmittians might object to this and argue that politics does not permeate the political because once the friend-enemy opposition is in place, all other motives—religious, moral, economic, and so on—disappear. I find this unconvincing, because it arises from either a terminological confusion or a disingenuous claim. All Schmitt says about this is that once they become the decisive friend-enemy constellation, “the relevant antithesis is no longer purely religious, moral, or economic, but political” and “at precisely the moment at which it becomes political, pushes aside and subordinates its hitherto purely religious, purely economic, purely cultural criteria and motives.”24 The terms I have italicized are quite eloquent. On the one hand, if an opposition is no longer purely religious because it has become political, one has to accept that it remains religious in some respect rather than in no way whatsoever. Hence the purity of the political is a bogus notion, as the supposedly autonomous code bears the mark of a hybridity of sorts. Kam Shapiro helps us to shore up this claim when he says that Schmitt’s friend-enemy opposition is in a way “parasitic” because it draws its force from other, non-political distinctions and commitments.25 We can identify a similar parasitism in Schmitt’s claim that all significant concepts of the state are secularized theological concepts.26 What he is saying here is that these secular concepts have a theological birthmark and thus that there is no relation of pure exteriority between them. This is another way of acknowledging that the political is penetrated by traces of the non-political. On the other hand, if non-political motives—that is to say, religious, moral, and others—are subordinated to the political, then they will play second fiddle to the political rather than bow gracefully and abandon the scene when it arrives. Likewise with conventions and institutions: they

are not the silent props of friend-enemy constellations because they partly configure them. The forms and rules of engagement—and by implication, the shape of friendship and enmity—change depending on whether the political opposition unfolds in authoritarian or democratic settings, in civil or international wars, in parliamentary debates, or in the streets. To cut to the chase, politics contaminates the political and reconfirms the claim about the double bind, coding, or inscription of the political.

**Formalism and the Normative Claim in Schmitt’s Decisionism**

This is, of course, an exciting yet disenchanted view of politics. Schmitt is either unconcerned about emancipation, social justice, and the handling of wrongs in general, or he sees these as ineffectual noises, rhetorical distractions from what really matters, namely, the gravitas of the friend-enemy code. It is also a somewhat formalistic account that puts him a stone’s throw away from endorsing an endless, aimless, or cynical confrontation between friends and enemies. The oxymoronic formula of “invariable change” describes its temporality. It is invariable because it rests on the friend-enemy code, yet it changes either because today’s friends may be tomorrow’s enemies or because the political has various historical modes of appearance—absolutist and liberal democratic states, for example, but also wars and revolutions—that modify the way the friend-enemy opposition will be played out. One could also say that the political is governed by what Gilles Deleuze describes as repetition and what Derrida calls the law of iterability—the paradox of a self-identity that incorporates a differential element whenever it is cited or re-enacted. Schmitt embraces this sense of repetition when he describes the trajectory of European modernity from the seventeenth to the twentieth century as a succession of spheres that functioned as matrices of meaning for the ideas, activities, and aspirations of each century. These spheres have been structured around different concerns, from the moral-theological of the seventeenth century to the humanitarian, economic, and technical ones of subsequent centuries; but what governs the succession from one to the other is the desire for a neutral and depoliticized domain that can function as a terrain where compromises can be reached. As all desire, this one will never be fulfilled, because for Schmitt the political is constitutive of the human

28. Carl Schmitt, “The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations” (1929), *Telos* 96 (Summer 1993): 130–42. See also the very good introduction to Schmitt’s text by
condition and will return despite our best efforts to deny, contain, repress, or neutralize it. Political history might never end, but it will always have a taste of déjà vu.

Critics such as Jacques Rancière distance themselves from Schmitt partly because of this. Like any other theorist, he seeks to formalize political phenomena in a conceptual grid; but for him politics does have “content”: equality is its measure, even if it appears only indirectly through the handling of a wrong. Politics is dissensus, the interruption of the given by the noisy demos or part of those who have no part in the existing order. This moves him away from Schmitt’s formalism by placing his understanding of politics under the aegis of emancipation. One way of undermining this formalism is to say that friend-enemy confrontations have a situated referent. It is whatever stands as the object of a dispute—an elected position, the control of a territory, the resignation of a corrupt official, the passing of a law, and so on. This breaks with the entropy of a purely binary coding of friend-enemy relations by introducing an excluded third into the basic kernel of the political. Schmitt might not be happy with this solution, but it allows us to retain his bare-bones concept of the political without falling into formalism. The reference to the excluded third also reinforces our claim about the double inscription, because it is another way of saying that politics is also present in the political.

Another option is to go along with Leo Strauss, an equally conservative critic of liberalism, who identified an underlying normative claim in Schmitt’s rendering of the political. While Schmitt saw the political as the status of man, as the fundamental human condition, Strauss showed that Schmitt’s pursuit of a purely political take on politics was a moral endeavor in disguise. It rested on the belief in the goodness of the status quo over the insecurity of a chaotic state of nature, and thus privileged decisions capable of upholding the existing order or, if the latter was


threatened, favored a decision capable of restoring the normal situation as a whole. The goodness of order was the unsaid moral judgment present in his work. The desire for order—for any order, regardless of what kind—is the absent ultima ratio of his political reasoning. That is why he contends that the real objective of the Schmittian affirmation of the political—his claim that friend-enemy oppositions are ineradicable—is not so much a polemic with liberalism as it is an effort to justify the moral need for government. Schmitt actually seeks to vindicate the Hobbesian demand for an instance capable of providing security by curbing the conflictive reality of the political, that is, by containing our own dangerousness and suppressing the dissociating effects of the political on the existing order. In the final analysis, says Strauss, Schmitt’s affirmation of the political against the liberal drive to negate or neutralize it is an affirmation of the moral and therefore turns out to be an inverted form of liberalism, liberalism with an opposite polarity.2

The cost of fending off the charge of formalism would be to embrace a moral claim—the goodness of an order that guarantees security—that turns Schmitt into a liberal in disguise, a closet liberal of sorts. Others would simply call him a conservative, which he was. Heinrich Meier makes a great deal out of Strauss’s critique, suggesting that Schmitt tacitly admitted that Strauss was right and that this explains his subsequent reassessment of Hobbes in the (infamous) 1934 edition of The Concept of the Political.33 There, Schmitt—now a member of the Nazi party and Hitler already Chancellor of the Reich—adds the opportunistic qualifier “Jew” when he speaks of an intellectual adversary like Harold Laski. No wonder he chose to use the earlier 1932 edition when his work was reissued in Germany in 1963. It is, of course, surprising to identify a moral prescription in the conceptual architecture of someone who never tired of extolling the virtues of decisionism in his polemic with Hans Kelsen and other neo-Kantian thinkers during the Weimar Republic. This weakens the purity of Schmitt’s decisionism, which is more of a problem for him, who cherished clear-cut distinctions, than for us, who take for granted that contamination is close to being the rule.34 The moral slant of his reasoning does more, too.

32. Ibid., pp. 113, 117.
33. Meier, Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss.
34. In truth, pure decisionism is also absent in the Schmittian account of politics for other reasons. We have seen how normative claims seep into his arguments about the political, either when he asks us to exclude absolute enemies or when he contends that the political nature of a group rests on its capacity to decide on its own who are its friends.
It shows that he, like Hobbes and the liberals he despised, wished to suppress—or more precisely in the case of Schmitt, to contain—the disruptive force of the political, to overcome the possibility of a state of nature that, as Strauss describes it, is not so much bellicose as it is insecure.\footnote{Strauss, “Notes on Carl Schmitt, \textit{The Concept of the Political},” p. 115.}

The suppression of conflict did not trouble Hobbes, who was happy to invoke the fable of an original state of nature and to endorse a zero-sum game between the \textit{status naturalis} and the \textit{status civilis}, or at least who thought that such a scenario was desirable albeit not necessarily attainable. For those of us who are suspicious of ruptures without residues, the belief that one can put an end to insecurity smacks of metaphysics or a convenient half-truth. Hobbes stops short of proposing such a rupture. This is either because we never surrender the right to self-preservation, in which case the rule of any absolute sovereign is bound to be n-1 or imperfect absolutist rule, as it were, or because our dangerous human nature never changes and will eventually disrupt the best regulated order. Either way, an all-powerful Leviathan would have to be a fixture of the civil state if we want to prevent a relapse into the state of nature. Schmitt does not endorse this suppression openly but performs a remarkable double act of rejection and celebration of Hobbes. He affirms the political through the transmutation of the war of all against all into the inevitability of friend-enemy oppositions (a peaceful stasis is unthinkable), but he pairs this with an unspoken goal of containing the insecurity of the political through the agency of a strong government that functions as shorthand for the state (a pacified domain is possible). This places the political in a register where the desire for closure (the goodness of order in the name of the containment of the political) overlaps with Schmitt’s efforts to disengage himself from this possibility through the lucid theorization of the double inscription of the political. He oscillates continually between these positions, which is why the actual meaning of the signifier “Schmitt” will vary according to whether one focuses on the desire for stability or the excessiveness of the political and what one does with the tension between these strands in his work.
Nowhere is this ambivalence more notorious than with regard to the state. To put it crudely, his reasoning reveals a conventional notion of political totality that overlaps with the territory of the sovereign state, and of scope, which takes the state as the desired field and object of politics. As we have seen, he acknowledges the loss of the state’s monopoly over politics and the emergence of new subjects of politics, but he also regrets the decline of the high politics of the Westphalian state-system and the type of certainties that accompanied it. Something similar happens with his theorization of sovereignty. Schmitt’s account sidesteps the need for a formally designated bearer of sovereignty—the state, a class, the people. He does this by stating that it resides in whoever can decide, on their own accord, if the situation has become exceptional and is able to restore normality, be it the state, a political party, or another grouping. This means that the location of sovereignty or the determination of who is the bearer of sovereignty is not fixed but is an effect of the play of the political. Yet, Schmitt undermines this situational account through his bias for the state as the decisive political unit. Being a critic of the liberal neutralization of the political—liberals postpone the moment of the decision by engaging in endless discussion—he wanted to restore the dignity and preeminence of the state. He was no doubt moved by a longing for the strong decisionism that prevailed in the times of the *jus publicum Europaeum*, or more likely among the few states that had the will and resources to be decisive in their affairs.6 States had been the key units engaging in the activity of aggregating friends and combating enemies, and he finds it desirable that they should remain the decisive political units given that they stabilize the political game within a governable entity. New political subjects can operate in a political microphysics of sorts as long as they do not dispute the preeminence of the macro space of the state.

**With and Despite Schmitt**

Schmitt is thus willing to admit that the democratic revolution has dealt a major blow to the pretension of endowing politics with a privileged subject and/or model. Yet he wavers. He is not prepared to accept the more radical consequences that follow from this, because in the final analysis he is unwilling to let go of the decisiveness of states. Had he done so, his

theorization of the political would have come close to what Derrida calls the structurality of structure, the acknowledgment that the center is part of the play of the structure and not a transcendental referent that governs it from outside, as it were. The state may well function as the center, but if it does, this is an effect of the play of forces rather than an a priori privilege—and of course, its centrality does not prevent it from being a site for the play of forces, too. Schmitt does not dare make this move; he fails to accept the absence of an ultimate ground of the political and hence misses the structurality of political structure. He ends up recognizing and fearing the contingency of objectivity ensuing from the double bind, which ultimately renders him a reactionary modernist or a conservative revolutionary of political thought, as Jeffrey Herf described Schmitt together with the likes of Jünger, Spengler, and Sombart.

Does this turn him into a mere commentator or contemporary emulato

er of Hobbes? Schmitt certainly admires Hobbes, whom he describes as “truly a powerful and systematic political thinker.” We have seen that both affirm the dangerousness of man or the inevitability of friend-enemy oppositions; and they do so in order to justify the need for government, one that will curb our dangerousness and therefore contain the centrifugal effects of the political. They also see domestic turmoil not as a nightmarish memory of times past but as an ever-present possibility that threatens the political order from within; the impossibility of (transcendental) closure is thus immanent. Yet, Schmitt differs from Hobbes in at least one respect. His state of nature knows of enemies as well as friends, so instead of an individualistic war of all against all where there are only enemies, there is a “war” that confronts groups, organized collectives. Strauss was the first to notice this. Hobbes conceives organized groups as sovereign states, but Schmitt’s thought of the political is not restricted to these agents because for him friend-enemy constellations precede the state and define the human condition.

This is not a minor difference. Three consequences follow from it. First, if the oppositions of the political define the human condition,

Schmitt has to conceive groups of friends and enemies as pre-statal realities. He concedes this by saying that the concept of the state presupposes that of the political; the latter is prior to and more encompassing than the state, which means that the state is one historical form or phase of the political among others and not its crowning moment. Second, if this is true, then Schmitt must also admit that there are or can be intra-statal groupings, such as political parties. He does so when he speaks of a new phase for political thought in the long passage quoted earlier. And once political parties become part of the political, there is no reason to exclude social movements and other groups either. Finally, by implication, there is nothing in his reasoning that prevents us from applying it to new non-statal groupings of friend and enemies that are developing outside the physical territory of the nation-state. That is to say, one can use Schmitt’s criterion of the political to examine political opposition in a post-Westphalian order, whether among states or involving actors who seek to modify the rhythm and direction of global processes from below the governmental level.

The refusal to equate politics with the political and the concomitant claim concerning the ubiquity and deterritorialization of friend-enemy oppositions open up a way of thinking politics that is not restricted to the sovereign state and which is unencumbered by a strong notion of totality. They are key aspects of Schmitt’s work worth keeping and developing, although, like other things in his writings, often in a direction he did not realize was possible to go or simply did not want to go. This is because Schmitt, the admirer of the Westphalian state system, perceived this development very well but also sought—or at least wished—to arrest it. For him, friend-enemy oppositions become a rough operational criterion to identify the political within or outside its designated, “proper” sites of appearance, which clearly amounts to an admission of the impropriety of the political—it can appear uninvited anytime, anywhere—but he nonetheless regrets this because he worries that it will be the undoing of the privileged place of the state. This impropriety amounts to a democratization of the decision on the exception, which he feared. This explains Schmitt’s efforts to contain the dissemination of the political. He did this, as a matter of practical judgment, when he encouraged the government to invoke Article 48 of the Weimar Constitution in 1932 in order to stop the NSDAP and the KPD from disputing sovereignty with the state. He also proposed it conceptually when he sought to limit legitimate partisan
warfare to the “telluric” or territorial type that existed prior to the ideological planetary guerrilla warfare inaugurated by Lenin and Mao. Yet, as mentioned, by theorizing the impropriety of politics—the possibility of friend-enemy groupings appearing anytime and anywhere—he already provides us with conceptual tools to undo the laces of the statal corset he would have liked to wrap around the political.

On balance, the advantages of Schmitt’s de-territorialized view of the political offset the difficulties it may have. It also provides us with an opening to catch a glimpse of something that goes further than a family resemblance between his thought and the post-foundational assertion of the structurality of political structure, even if he ultimately pulls back from acknowledging the full consequences of this.

Two questions remain, and I can only mention them briefly. One is whether there is or can be something in between friendship and enmity, that is to say, whether this basic criterion suffices or needs something else to account for political performances that are not clearly or not necessarily classifiable in these terms. Symbolic gestures, such as a march against corruption in public life, a candlelight vigil for victims of racism, or the Live 8 concerts of the Make Poverty History campaign, may be deemed political without identifying a particular enemy or raising the possibility of war in any obvious way. Those who participate in such actions are friends in the political sense of constituting a community of like-minded people who defend a way of life but do not necessarily perceive politics in terms of friends and enemies. The other problem is how to avoid a formalistic account of antagonism, as my proposal that one should refer to an absent term—the excluded third or object of dispute—as a situational referent for political engagements between friends and enemies is perhaps only an ad-hoc solution. It is nonetheless a beginning.

40. I thank Kam Shapiro for pointing out the connection with Theory of the Partisan.

41. I thank four careful readers of Schmitt—Javier Franzé, David Pan, Gabriella Slomp, and Kam Shapiro—for their comments on an earlier draft of this article. Their many fine observations pinpointed weaknesses I wouldn’t have perceived without their eye for detail.