

schmitt concept of the political

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The Schmitt concept of the political is a foundational idea in political philosophy that explores the nature of politics, the distinction between friend and enemy, and the inherent conflict within political life. Developed by Carl Schmitt, a German jurist and political theorist, this concept emphasizes the centrality of the political as an autonomous sphere characterized by existential opposition and the potential for conflict. Understanding Schmitt's perspective provides critical insights into the nature of sovereignty, the state of exception, and the dynamics of power in modern political systems. This article delves into the core ideas of Schmitt's concept of the political, its historical context, and its relevance to contemporary political theory.

Understanding the Foundations of Schmitt's Political Theory

Who Was Carl Schmitt?

Carl Schmitt (1888–1985) was a prominent legal and political theorist whose work has left a lasting impact on the understanding of sovereignty, authority, and the nature of political conflict. His writings often grappled with the crises of modernity, the rise of totalitarian regimes, and the role of law and sovereignty in extraordinary circumstances.

Schmitt's thought was heavily influenced by the turbulence of the early 20th century, including World War I, the Weimar Republic, and the rise of fascism. His ideas are controversial due to their association with authoritarian regimes, but his analytical framework remains influential in political philosophy.

The Core Premise of the Concept of the Political

At the heart of Schmitt's theory lies the assertion that the political is a distinct sphere of human activity characterized by the fundamental distinction between friend and enemy. This dichotomy is not merely about personal conflicts but about the existential threats facing a political community.

Schmitt argues that:

- The political is distinguished from other spheres such as morality,

economics, or aesthetics.

- Its defining feature is the capacity for decisive action in the face of existential danger.
- The friend-enemy distinction is the primary criterion that defines political groups and actions.

The Friend-Enemy Distinction as the Definition of the Political

The Centrality of the Friend-Enemy Binary

According to Schmitt, the essence of the political is rooted in the ability to distinguish between friends and enemies. This binary is not about personal preferences but about the survival of collective identities, values, and political orders.

Key points about the friend-enemy distinction:

- It signifies an existential threat: enemies are those who threaten the political community's existence.
- It can be either real or perceived; the perception of threat is often sufficient to initiate political action.
- The distinction is absolute: political decisions often revolve around identifying who is a friend and who is an enemy.

Implications of this distinction:

- Political conflicts are fundamentally about survival.
- The identification of enemies justifies extraordinary measures, including war or authoritarian rule.
- The community's integrity depends on the ability to recognize and oppose enemies.

Examples in History and Politics

Schmitt's concept is exemplified in various historical contexts:

- The enemy as a political actor during wartime.
- Civil wars where factions see each other as enemies.
- Modern debates on national security and terrorism, where threats are often framed as existential enemies.

Sovereignty and the Decision on the State of Exception

Sovereign as the One Who Decides on the Exception

Schmitt famously defined sovereignty in his work "Political Theology" with the statement: "Sovereign is he who decides on the exception." This highlights the crucial role of the sovereign in moments of crisis when normal legal order is suspended.

Key aspects of this idea:

- The sovereign has the authority to declare a state of emergency.
- During crises, legal norms may be bypassed to preserve the political order.
- The decision to suspend law is a quintessential political act.

The State of Exception in Schmitt's Thought

Schmitt's concept of the state of exception refers to extraordinary circumstances where normal legal procedures are suspended to protect the state. This decision:

- Is inherently political.
- Demonstrates the limits of legal order.
- Reflects the sovereign's capacity to act decisively.

Contemporary Relevance:

- Emergency laws invoked during crises such as terrorism or pandemics.
- Debates about executive powers and constitutional limits.

The Political and the Concept of the Constitution

Distinction from Morality and Law

Schmitt emphasizes that the political is distinct from moral or legal considerations. While law and morality seek universal principles, politics involves decisions based on existential threats and collective identities.

Key differences:

- Law seeks to regulate behavior based on universal norms.
- Politics involves decisive action in situations where norms are insufficient or inapplicable.
- The political is ultimately about the survival of the political community.

The Role of the Constitution

While constitutions attempt to regulate political life, Schmitt warns that in extreme situations, constitutional norms may be overridden by political necessity. The constitution thus provides a framework, but sovereignty resides in the capacity to decide on the exceptional.

Critiques and Controversies Surrounding Schmitt's Concept of the Political

Criticisms of Schmitt's Theories

Schmitt's ideas have faced numerous criticisms:

- Potential for Authoritarianism: His emphasis on decisionism and the state of exception can justify authoritarian measures.
- Biological and Militaristic Connotations: The friend-enemy binary may reinforce divisive or militaristic attitudes.
- Association with Totalitarianism: His collaboration with Nazi regimes has tainted his reputation and raised questions about the applicability of his ideas.

Debates in Contemporary Philosophy

Despite criticisms, Schmitt's concept remains influential in:

- Political realism.
- Critical theories analyzing sovereignty and state power.
- Discussions on emergency powers and authoritarian tendencies.

Relevance of Schmitt's Concept of the Political Today

Modern Political Challenges

In today's world, the Schmitt concept of the political helps analyze:

- Cybersecurity threats.
- Terrorism and asymmetric warfare.
- Populist movements and identity politics.
- State responses to crises like pandemics or economic collapses.

Schmitt's Legacy in Political Science and Philosophy

Schmitt's ideas continue to influence scholarly debates:

- In understanding the nature of sovereignty and authority.
- Analyzing the limits of legal and constitutional frameworks.
- Exploring the line between legality and political necessity.

Critically Engaging with Schmitt

Readers and scholars should:

- Recognize the importance of the friend-enemy distinction in political identity.
- Be cautious about the potential for authoritarianism.
- Consider the ethical implications of decisionism and the suspension of norms.

Conclusion

The Schmitt concept of the political offers a profound and often provocative lens through which to understand the nature of political conflict, sovereignty, and decision-making. While controversial, especially given its historical associations, Schmitt's emphasis on the existential dimension of politics and the central role of the friend-enemy binary remain vital for analyzing both historical and contemporary political phenomena. Engaging critically with his ideas allows for a deeper appreciation of the tensions inherent in political life and the perennial questions about authority, legitimacy, and the limits of law.

Summary of Key Concepts:

- The political is distinguished by the friend-enemy distinction.
- Sovereignty involves the capacity to decide on the exception.
- The state of exception is a necessary tool in times of crisis.
- Politics is separate from law and morality, focusing on collective survival.
- Critical engagement with Schmitt's ideas reveals both their analytical power and their ethical challenges.

Further Reading:

- Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*.
- Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*.
- Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*.
- Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*.

Understanding Schmitt's concept of the political remains essential for scholars interested in sovereignty, conflict, and the nature of power,

especially in times of crisis.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Carl Schmitt's main argument in 'The Concept of the Political'?

Schmitt argues that the core of the political is the distinction between friend and enemy, emphasizing that the political is defined by this existential conflict rather than by ideology, morality, or economic interests.

How does Schmitt differentiate between the political and other social spheres?

Schmitt distinguishes the political from other spheres by its focus on the potential for conflict and the necessity of decisive sovereignty, whereas other domains like morality or economics aim at harmony and cooperation.

Why is the concept of the 'enemy' central to Schmitt's political theory?

For Schmitt, the enemy embodies the ultimate challenge to the political community, as recognizing an enemy is essential for defining the boundaries of the political and asserting sovereignty.

How has Schmitt's concept of the political influenced contemporary political theory?

Schmitt's emphasis on sovereignty, conflict, and the friend-enemy distinction has impacted debates on authoritarianism, the nature of sovereignty, and the limits of liberal democracy, often inspiring both critical and conservative thought.

What are some criticisms of Schmitt's concept of the political?

Critics argue that Schmitt's focus on conflict and enemy identification can promote exclusivism, undermine pluralism, and justify authoritarian or anti-democratic tendencies, raising concerns about its applicability in liberal democratic societies.

Additional Resources

Schmitt's Concept of the Political: An In-Depth Examination

The political, as a fundamental domain of human existence, has been a subject of philosophical inquiry for centuries. Among the most influential modern thinkers to analyze the essence and boundaries of the political is Carl Schmitt (1888–1985), a German jurist and political theorist whose work has sparked both acclaim and controversy. His conception of the political offers a distinctive lens through which to understand sovereignty, conflict, and the nature of political identity. This article explores Schmitt's concept of the political in detail, tracing its origins, core principles, implications, and ongoing debates.

Understanding the Foundations of Schmitt's Political Thought

Carl Schmitt's thought emerges against the backdrop of early 20th-century political turbulence, including World War I, the interwar period, and the rise of totalitarian regimes. His work is characterized by a focus on the decisive moments in politics, emphasizing the importance of sovereignty, existential conflict, and the distinction between friend and enemy.

At its core, Schmitt's view of the political is rooted in the idea that politics is fundamentally about the capacity to distinguish between friend and enemy. This delineation is not merely about personal preferences or ideological differences but pertains to the existential threat or alliance that defines collective identity.

The Centrality of the Sovereign and the Decision

Schmitt's conception of sovereignty is crucial to understanding his political theory. In his seminal work, *Political Theology* (1922), he asserts that:

- Sovereign is he who decides on the exception: The sovereign's power is demonstrated in extraordinary circumstances where normal law and constitutional order are suspended. This decision-maker embodies ultimate authority in moments of crisis.
- The exception as a political act: The capacity to suspend legal norms during emergencies reveals the core of sovereignty and highlights the importance of decisive action in politics.

This emphasis on decision-making underscores Schmitt's view that politics is

characterized by moments of decisive action, especially when the stakes involve the survival of political entities.

The Friend-Enemy Distinction

Perhaps the most famous and controversial aspect of Schmitt's political thought is his articulation of the friend-enemy distinction:

- The political is defined by its capacity to distinguish friends from enemies: For Schmitt, this distinction is not moral but existential, rooted in the potential for mortal conflict.
- Enemy as a political category: The enemy is not necessarily immoral or evil but represents a real threat to the political community's existence or values.
- Friend as a unifying identity: Friends share common interests, beliefs, or identities, fostering cohesion within the political community.

This dichotomy is fundamental because it delineates the boundaries of political communities and determines the intensity and nature of political conflict. It also implies that political action is justified when it aims to confront or eliminate the enemy.

Schmitt's Concept of the Political: Deep Dive into Core Principles

Having established the foundational ideas, this section explores the core principles of Schmitt's concept of the political, emphasizing its philosophical, legal, and practical dimensions.

1. The Ontology of the Political

Schmitt contends that the political is an autonomous sphere of human existence, distinguishable from ethics, economics, or religion. He argues that:

- The political is rooted in the existence of conflict: Conflict is an inherent feature of political life, not a deviation or anomaly.
- The political is distinguished by existential struggle: It involves the potential for mortal confrontation, which determines the boundaries and

identities of communities.

- The political is expressed through the friend-enemy distinction: This boundary-setting defines the scope and intensity of political engagement.

This ontological view posits that the political is a fundamental aspect of human life, not reducible to other social or moral spheres.

2. The Role of Sovereignty and Decisionism

Building on his understanding of sovereignty, Schmitt emphasizes:

- Decisionism: The belief that in times of crisis, the sovereign must make a decisive move to preserve the political order.

- Exceptionalism: The idea that normal legal constraints may be suspended during emergencies, highlighting the primacy of political decision-making over legal norms.

- The importance of the state: Schmitt's focus on the state as the ultimate political authority capable of making such decisions.

This perspective has influenced debates on the scope of executive power and the legitimacy of emergency measures.

3. The Political as a Distinct Realm

Schmitt's assertion that the political is a sui generis sphere implies:

- Autonomy from morality or legality: The political is not governed solely by moral considerations or legal norms but by the necessity to confront existential threats.

- The primacy of political affiliation: Loyalty and identity within the community are crucial, and political loyalty often transcends individual moral concerns.

- The potential for conflict: The political is inherently conflictual, and this conflict is not necessarily negative but a defining feature.

Implications and Controversies Surrounding

Schmitt's Concept of the Political

Schmitt's ideas have generated extensive debate, both for their philosophical depth and their political implications. His emphasis on the friend-enemy dichotomy, sovereignty, and decisionism has been both influential and contentious.

Political Realism and Critique

Schmitt is often regarded as a political realist, emphasizing power, conflict, and the necessity of decisive action. Critics argue that:

- Potential for authoritarianism: His focus on sovereignty and exception raises concerns about the justification for authoritarian or dictatorial powers.
- Exclusion of moral considerations: By prioritizing the friend-enemy distinction, Schmitt arguably sidesteps moral or ethical concerns, risking justifying violence or repression.
- Historical associations: His association with nationalist and authoritarian regimes, especially during the Nazi era, has tainted interpretations of his work.

Schmitt's Influence on Contemporary Political Theory

Despite controversies, Schmitt's concept of the political continues to influence various fields:

- Legal theory: His ideas about sovereignty and the exception shape debates on constitutional law and emergency powers.
- Political philosophy: Scholars explore his ontological claims about conflict and the nature of political identity.
- Critical theory: Some interpret Schmitt's work as providing tools to analyze contemporary conflicts, nationalism, and sovereignty crises.

Schmitt's Legacy and Modern Relevance

Schmitt's concept of the political remains a potent framework for understanding the dynamics of power, conflict, and decision-making in modern

times.

1. The Relevance in Contemporary Politics

In an era marked by:

- Rising nationalism and identity politics: The friend-enemy distinction seems more pronounced, echoing Schmitt's insights.
- State of emergency and security concerns: Governments often invoke crises to justify exceptional measures, aligning with Schmitt's decisionism.
- Global conflicts and sovereignty disputes: The debates over sovereignty, intervention, and the limits of state power resonate with Schmitt's ideas.

2. Philosophical and Ethical Challenges

Schmitt's work invites critical reflection on the nature of political judgment, legitimacy, and the balance between authority and morality.

- Should political authority prioritize decisive action over moral constraints?
- How can societies safeguard democratic principles while recognizing the realities of conflict and sovereignty?
- Is the friend-enemy distinction an inevitable aspect of political life, or can it be transcended?

Conclusion: The Enduring Significance of Schmitt's Concept of the Political

Carl Schmitt's concept of the political offers a stark, compelling framework for understanding the core dynamics of political life. By emphasizing conflict, sovereignty, and decisive action, Schmitt challenges idealistic notions of politics as purely moral or legal enterprise. His work underscores the reality that politics often involves existential choices, confrontations, and the necessity to define enemies and friends in times of crisis.

While his ideas have been criticized for their potential for authoritarian interpretation and moral ambiguity, their influence persists across legal, political, and philosophical domains. As contemporary societies grapple with

sovereignty disputes, security dilemmas, and identity conflicts, revisiting Schmitt's insights remains both relevant and vital. His concept of the political continues to serve as a provocative reminder that politics, at its core, is about the fundamental choices that define human collective existence.

References (for further reading):

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This comprehensive exploration of Schmitt's concept of the political aims to provide clarity on his core ideas, their philosophical underpinnings, and their ongoing significance in understanding the nature of political conflict and sovereignty.

Schmitt Concept Of The Political

schmitt concept of the political: The Concept of the Political Carl Schmitt, 2024-05-31
Arguably Schmitt's most influential work . . . recognized as one of the most important tracts of modern political thought. —Samuel Earle, *The New Statesman* In this, his most influential work, legal theorist and political philosopher Carl Schmitt argues that liberalism's basis in individual rights cannot provide a reasonable justification for sacrificing oneself for the state—a critique as cogent today as when it first appeared. George Schwab's introduction to his translation of the 1932 German edition highlights Schmitt's intellectual journey through the turbulent period of German history leading to the Hitlerian one-party state. In addition to analysis by Leo Strauss and a foreword by Tracy B. Strong placing Schmitt's work into contemporary context, this expanded edition also includes a translation of Schmitt's 1929 lecture *The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations*, which the author himself added to the 1932 edition of the book. An essential update on a modern classic, *The Concept of the Political, Expanded Edition* belongs on the bookshelf of anyone interested in political theory or philosophy. Contains much of what is fundamental in Schmitt's understanding of the political nature of man and the state, including his contentious definition of the political as the distinction between friend and enemy . . . Its scholarship is unquestionable. —Joseph W. Bendersky, *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* The best introduction to Schmitt's thought. —Mark Lilla, *New York Review of Books* [A] foundational work . . . Minor disagreements over terms fade . . . in light of the superb job Schwab has done rendering Schmitt's long, multi-clausal German sentences into concise, pellucid English. —Robert D. Rachlin, *HNet*

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This thesis examines Carl Schmitt's political theorizing. Carl Schmitt was one of modern Germany's most influential political theorists. He is most well-known for his work 'The Concept of the Political' which explicated his understanding of politics; the political is most clearly revealed in the distinction between friends and enemies. However, exactly how Schmitt conceived of the decision regarding friend and enemy as paradigmatic for an understanding of healthy politics is problematic. Schmitt presented the friend-enemy distinction in a rhetorically forceful but conceptually unclear manner. This thesis investigates whether one can coherently make sense of Schmitt's concept of the political and whether Schmitt's teaching regarding the political can be understood as forming a coherent whole; is there an identifiable basis or perspective which consistently informs Schmitt's thinking about what the political is. While there is much to be learned from previous efforts to comprehend Carl Schmitt, for the most part, these efforts have not taken into account his serious moral and theological concerns. Schmitt should be understood primarily as a political theologian; he conceived of history and politics as a field of providential struggle. Schmitt particularly viewed liberalism from such a perspective; he found in liberalism the most extensive rejection of the sovereign status of God in human affairs. In turn, the best way to investigate Schmitt's theorizing is to examine his understanding of Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes' political philosophy is central to Schmitt's theorizing. Schmitt sought to rehabilitate Hobbes as the philosopher who could be employed in comprehending the modern world. However, Schmitt, who originally thought of Hobbes as the philosopher best suited to his own project, was forced to return to Hobbes' positions which seem impious. Ultimately, Schmitt attempted to rescue Hobbes the 'vir probus' whose thinking was devout from the image of Hobbes as the creator of a new mortal god. The consistency of Schmitt's own theorizing is reflected directly in his thinking about Hobbes. Hobbes' political philosophy is the key to understanding Schmitt's criticisms of modernity and his explication of the political and is the most important test case for investigating the political theological nature of his thought.

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schmitt concept of the political: The Politics of time. Introduction to Carl Schmitt's Political Thought Miguel Saralegui, 2021-07-01 Carl Schmitt is the last thinker to provide a complete, original definition of politics. His work influences many debates in contemporary political theory through a collection of concepts he created: political theology, the katechon, friend and enemy. Despite how influential his ideas are, they tend to be employed metaphorically, and sometimes incorrectly. This miscalculation is due to Carl Schmitt himself, who never gave us a final, complete version of his political thought, or even of some of his most famous concepts. In this book, I aim to reconstruct his political thought using three key concepts: political theology, the concept of the political, and the theory of modernity. To do so, I have consulted all his published works, but also the archival documents, in particular those with ties to Spain, which had previously received little attention. This reconstruction offers readers a qualitative introduction to Schmitt's political thought that aims to blend logical clarity with document-based evidence.

schmitt concept of the political: Carl Schmitt's State and Constitutional Theory Benjamin A. Schupmann, 2017-11-17 Can a constitutional democracy commit suicide? Can an illiberal antidemocratic party legitimately obtain power through democratic elections and amend liberalism and democracy out of the constitution entirely? In Weimar Germany, these theoretical questions were both practically and existentially relevant. By 1932, the Nazi and Communist parties combined held a majority of seats in parliament. Neither accepted the legitimacy of liberal democracy. Their only reason for participating democratically was to amend the constitution out of existence. This book analyses Carl Schmitt's state and constitutional theory and shows how it was conceived in response to the Weimar crisis. Right-wing and left-wing political extremists recognized that a path to legal revolution lay in the Weimar constitution's combination of democratic procedures, total neutrality toward political goals, and positive law. Schmitt's writings sought to address the unique problems posed by mass democracy. Schmitt's thought anticipated 'constrained' or 'militant' democracy, a type of constitution that guards against subversive expressions of popular sovereignty and whose mechanisms include the entrenchment of basic constitutional commitments and party bans. Schmitt's state and constitutional theory remains important: the problems he identified continue to exist within liberal democratic states. Schmitt offers democrats today a novel way to understand the legitimacy of liberal democracy and the limits of constitutional change.

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