

Introduction

On the Possibility of a Non-Objectivist Political Ontology

Spring 1947 witnessed a momentous set of events: the recurrent interrogations of Carl Schmitt (1888–1985) by his American captors at Nuremberg. The triptych of the transcripts of these examinations, gathered in the first special issue of the journal *Telos* (Summer 1987) devoted entirely to the German political thinker, gives the reader a vivid insight into Schmitt's *apologia* in the course of which he was prompted to respond to the charges of providing a theoretical justification for Hitler's *Grossraum* policy and of collaborating in preparation of the wars of aggression. The questioning by Robert Kempner bordered on the absurd, requesting the defendant to write up constitutional opinions and essay-form responses to the incriminations. But, more than anything, at the dusk of Western metaphysics, it inverted the judicial scene that occurred at the inception of this philosophical tradition: the trial of Socrates. What Schmitt went through was not a public trial—he was never formally charged with the allegations set before him, nor was he tried by his compatriots, nor was he sentenced to death as a result. While Socrates was accused, chiefly, of subverting the Athenian *polis*, Schmitt faced the charges of supporting and collaborating with the Nazi state. In the first case, the philosopher appeared to be a threat to public order, at odds with the democratic authorities of the day; in the second case, the political thinker was presented as the handmaid of Hitler's regime, the agent who laid the groundwork for a new order. Whereas the fault of Socrates was, in a nutshell, that he dangerously exceeded the legal and custom-bound particularities of his city-state (trumpeting philosophy as a universal vocation), the crime of Schmitt was that, whether directly or indirectly, he aided and abetted German expansionism and its wars of aggression against what is universally human.

These differences are symptomatic of the epochal contrasts between ancient Greece and Nazi Germany—the contrasts thinkers like Heidegger preferred to see as the closest of affinities—as well as between the beginning and the end of Western metaphysics, when the Platonic politics of truth, guided by the eternal, objective light of Ideas, is supplanted by post-metaphysical political thought, deriving its meaning from the concreteness of human existence. The Socratic subversion is a metaphysical embrace of the world of pure thought at the expense of all historical contingencies; the Schmittian sedition consists in a series of post-metaphysical interventions described as occasionalist, if not opportunist.

All too often, however, Schmitt has been read, precisely, as a political metaphysician, even by commentators as perceptive as Jacques Derrida. In a curious and bitterly ironic remark during the April 1947 interrogations, Schmitt reflected on the reception of his thought in response to Kempner's assurance that he would examine the requested legal opinion of the former "very closely." "I am happy to have found a reader once again," Schmitt quipped, "In general, my writings have been read very poorly. I fear the superficial reader."¹ This reproach, addressed not solely to the immediate interrogator, rings true over the decades that have passed since then and is as fresh for us as it was over sixty years ago, partly because the 1947 interrogations have never really ended but have been leading posthumous existence years after the author's death, and partly because Schmitt's fears turned out to be warranted. What would it mean to read him "very closely" and in a way that is not superficial? Would there be any space left for a metaphysical interpretation were this demand satisfied? And, if not, which alternative intellectual resources and traditions could assist us in living up to such a demand?

The recent resurgence of interest in Schmitt, among those on the Left and on the Right alike, that has made of him a prophet heralding the decline of classical Liberalism, leaves one reluctant to join the fray, even if it is to add a dissenting voice. Faced with the avalanche of "Schmitt scholarship" in the late twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries, the goal of those who study his works should be to say *less*, rather than more, to subtract from the interpretive sediments that which suppresses and suffocates the original thinking of the political *as* political. To a certain extent, Schmitt's preferred strategy of "the safety of silence," *die Sicherheit des Schweigens*,² ought to be transformed into the reticence of interpretation. This does not mean that we should ignore the rich history of reception, on both sides of the Atlantic, of writings that prove to be more and more relevant and influential today; what I am advocating is a *reduction* of this mass of primary

and secondary sources, to the political philosophical architecture they sketch out. While Schmitt's fundamental concepts of the sovereign decision, the state of exception, and the friend-enemy distinction, to name but a few, have become common currency in contemporary practical and theoretical analyses of texts and concrete political situations, their philosophical underpinnings and, more importantly, the impulse that gave birth to them have been largely ignored. The standard approach to the study of the genesis of these concepts is broadly historical, in that it pays painstaking attention to the context and circumstances of their emergence in the chaos of Weimar Germany, for example, prompting Schmitt to write an extensive critique of liberal constitutionalism collated in his influential *Verfassungslehre* (*Constitutional Theory*). The historicist methodology is, certainly, justified by the overtly polemical nature of his texts, by his professional training as a jurist, and by his insistently negative estimation of philosophy in general and of metaphysics in particular. One could even argue that, in the disparate writings stretching over a significant portion of the twentieth century, Schmitt produced neither political *philosophy*, nor, even, political thought, in a conventional sense, but an engaged and somewhat fragmentary practical theory of politics.

This argument, however, does a major disservice to what are, perhaps, the most ground-breaking political ideas of the past century, for at least three reasons. First, it treats their intuitions as mere reactions to historical circumstances; second, it is willing to concede to them an extremely limited scope of relevance, conditioned by the extent to which our situation is still that of Schmitt (or is, at least, analogously so); and, third, it veils the deeper motivations for his interventions in political thought and practice. To say less about these interventions is to distill from them the political philosophical architecture that definitively sets aside the classical Aristotelian foundations for the thinking of the political and that refuses to impose a prefabricated form onto the content of political life, which alone bestows meaning on what has been correctly identified as the practical theory of politics. This non-Aristotelian architectonics does not amount to a system of thought but to an *ontology* that inquires into the uniquely political mode of being, the ultimate goal of Schmitt's analyses, which I will elucidate with reference to his writings of the early and late periods alike.

Some will object, straightaway, that the emphasis on ontology is incongruous with political theology, which, instead of restricting the political sphere to a static systemic arrangement, considers it in the flux of its becoming—not of Being—as a history of secularization. The above objection will hold little sway as soon as we acknowledge that it revolves around a vague

understanding of *ontology* and an even more tentative grasp of what the real target of Schmitt's criticism is, namely, the objectivist-metaphysical ontology of impersonal political structures and institutions, from which flesh-and-blood human beings have been either evacuated by a theoretical sleight of hand or rendered purely hypothetical, as in John Rawls's conjectures about the "veil of ignorance," leveling and equalizing the electoral processes. The new political ontology is not so much the ontology of power but of political subjectivity and, hence, of the concrete existence of embodied figures populating Schmitt's *oeuvre*: the sovereign, the enemy, the friend, the partisan, and so on. In other words, politics is an experience—and the most intense one at that—of human beings, whose very humanness is defined by the possibility of undergoing it, while political ontology is an inquiry into this experiential field, lacking any predetermined structures, norms, or ground-rules.

Although the relation between political existence and institutions is largely negative, one cannot afford to neglect this latter tier of politics. The non-normative description of political experience does not bar a meditation on the ways in which political structures overlay, predicate themselves on, and—let it be stated already—suffocate raw political experiences, thereby inadvertently undermining themselves. The descriptive and the critical trajectories of Schmitt's thought combine to form the second facet of his political ontology—an applied hermeneutical phenomenology. The interpretation of human collective existence, of being-with and being-against others (I ask the reader to indulge me with this preliminary recoding of the friend-enemy distinction in onto-phenomenological terms), is complemented by a rigorous phenomenological reduction that strives to disclose the experiential sources of the political buried beneath multiple institutional strata and sealed by the bureaucratization and reification of the political. Describing these mutilated experiences, Schmitt wishes, in harmony with the phenomenological objectives of the late Edmund Husserl, to de-sediment, to reactivate, and to reorient them toward the future, with recourse to the "real possibility" that would impart a new sense of vitality, incompatible with the endorsement of a totalitarian state, to collective existence. But it is not only the critical-reductive inclination that unites Husserl and Schmitt against the bureaucratization and, hence, the "deadening" of life in modernity; in *Constitutional Theory*,³ the latter acknowledges his indebtedness to the early work of the former, or, more precisely, to his theory of identity worked out in *Logical Investigations*, which enriches our appreciation of the discussions of democratic identification in *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* and *Legality and Legitimacy*. To sum up, then,

non-objectivist political ontology is an existential-phenomenological reinvention of political philosophy with an eye to the lived experience of politics and its corrosion in modernity.

Most contemporary applications of *political ontology* are still shackled to the objectivist metaphysics of those structures and forces that are observable from “a bird’s eye-view” and are *a posteriori* accessible in the experience of actual political subjects.⁴ Other uses of the term, for instance, by Slavoj Žižek,⁵ place an exclusive emphasis on the subject, idealizing it, despite overt declarations of allegiance to materialism, dialectical or otherwise. The advantage of a existential-phenomenological political ontology is that it is capable of balancing a critical analysis of institutions and a descriptive characterization of subjective experiences. Among its adherents we might single out, in addition to Schmitt, two twentieth-century French theorists: Claude Lefort and Jean-Paul Sartre. Tackling the disincarnation of the political as a consequence of the French Revolution, Lefort successfully applied the phenomenological categories of his master, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, toward a philosophical analysis of democracy. At the core of the argument is the idea that the democratic *body politic* constitutes itself without a stable embodiment and that the participants in the democratic contest desire to occupy, though only temporarily, this empty place, without ever filling the ontological void of democracy. Given this promising conclusion, it is rather unfortunate that Lefort’s keen phenomenological sensibility is too abstract and totalizing, because it lacks an existential dimension, but, instead, foregrounds the most amorphous phenomenological concept of flesh, which Merleau-Ponty, too, favored.⁶ In turn, Sartre explored the political implications of both phenomenology and existentialism with reference to a particular political subject: the working class. Marrying Hegelian Marxism and Heideggerianism in *Being and Nothingness*, he came to the quintessentially Schmittian insight that the political distinction between “us” and “them” is built into political ontology from which the Third is absent.⁷ Nevertheless, the “Us-object” that struggles to cast off the neutralizing, oppressive Third and to constitute itself as a “We-subject” is nothing but the class-consciousness of the oppressed. The problem with Sartre is, therefore, diametrically opposed to Lefort’s theoretical shortcoming: where the latter chose an extremely abstract level of analysis for his political ontology, the former imposed on it a historical stricture of the proletarian collectivity that both trivialized other agonistic subjectivities and outlived, to a certain extent, its historical relevance.

To be sure, in his private diaries, Schmitt often registered his impatience with, if not a disdain toward, phenomenology and existentialism.

In the postwar notebooks, he writes, “But the ‘I’ is not the friend, nor is the ‘non-I’ the enemy. It is not a matter of phenomenology; it is a matter of the accumulations of power in which one must assert oneself.”⁸ Martin Heidegger’s “ontological-existential method of interpretation” in *Being and Time* receives the appellation *Kitschig-banal* and “ethical-characteristic” (G 109–110). And, in the same notes collected in *Glossarium*, he calls Heidegger “my dear friend and my honored enemy” (G 263). That Schmitt underestimated the influence of phenomenology and existentialism on his own thinking has been noted by his contemporaries, such as Karl Löwith, who concludes that, “It is no accident if Heidegger’s existential ontology corresponds to a political ‘decisionism’ in Carl Schmitt, a decisionism that shifts the capacity for ‘Being-as-a-whole’ of the Dasein which is always on its own to the ‘totality’ of the state which is always one’s own.”⁹ What Löwith and Richard Wolin in his footsteps omit is that, in the course of human existence, this capacity is never actualized, except in the moment of death. Although the construction of the totality is the nagging obsession of *Being and Time*, Heidegger is mindful of how impossible such a project would be, in light of the ecstatic character of existence that does not coincide with itself due to its temporal lag behind (thrownness) and being ahead of (projection) itself. Wolin’s extension of this faulty argument to Schmitt’s writings is under a patently wrong impression that the existential preoccupation with wholeness results in political totalitarianism.¹⁰ Much ink and paper could have been saved were Heidegger’s existentialism and its consequences properly understood in terms of the impossibility of totalizing human existence in its temporal openness.

Even if we are to entertain the hypothesis that Schmitt’s political thought comes into sharper relief against an extensive existential-phenomenological background, doubts will arise regarding the relevance of the proposed methodology, specifically, to a constructive theory of the political. “Existentialism and phenomenology,” writes Michael Gillespie, “live always in anticipation of a radical change that at its core may be unattainable . . . They are thus not likely to be the source of a lasting or stable politics, but they are likely to be a continuing voice of dissatisfaction with politics in its everyday incarnations.”¹¹ It is true that one should not harbor the hope that “a lasting or stable politics” could come into being on the existential-phenomenological grounds of subjective political existence. And yet, this impossibility is not entirely negative, for it gives us a foretaste of Schmitt’s political ontology free from transcendentalist and objectivist-metaphysical

prejudices. To ascertain that politics is ultimately grounded in concrete life and in collective existence is to deny that its foundations depend on any preset legal or normative parameters. The devaluation of the transcendental grounding for politics, perspicaciously observed by Mathias Schmitz,¹² wakes us up to a postfoundational political ontology, the elements of which are discussed in Part I of this book. Setting the stage for this inquiry, Chapter 1 conceives of *nomos*, norms, and the law in terms of limiting lines and boundaries, as opposed to the exceptional point of the political, where the sovereign decision is made prior to and outside of these delimitations. What Schmitt calls “the point of the political,” at which a certain quantity of antagonism qualitatively transforms and politicizes all other domains of human activity, likewise belongs in this geometry of the exception. The precariousness of the point detached from the line is rife with risk that, in the existential sense of the term, saturates all political actions and phenomena in Schmitt’s writings. The groundlessness of the political is poignantly expressed in the hopelessness of the partisan, who takes the risk of radical action and fights in the face of the overwhelming odds of defeat. It also inflects all political decisions and recognitions (of the enemy, for instance) with extreme uncertainty that liberal administrative escapism tries to eliminate by subjugating substantive questions to procedural exigencies (Chapter 2).

Further accentuating the groundlessness of the political, Chapter 3 conceives of the event central to Schmitt’s political philosophy on the model of Derrida’s anti-metaphysical event of expropriation. The “purity” of the political, which is but a quantitative intensity of antagonism, hinges on the fact that—unlike economics, morality, and so on—it does not have a proper domain of its own. It, rather, ungrounds all other realms of human action, and since the possibility of politicization inheres in them, the political may be understood as their de- or expropriation. The difference and non-identity that inhabit the core of political identity, finally, take the form of a question: being put in question by the enemy as the first step toward political subjecthood and viewing the enemy as the shape of our own question. Casting existence and the human figure itself in terms of an open-ended question without a definitive, essentialist answer completes the vital elements of Schmitt’s non-objectivist political ontology (Chapter 4).

The second part of *Groundless Existence* matches the pattern identified by Michael Gillespie, in that it presents a phenomenological critique of politics, the Schmittian “voice of dissatisfaction” with what goes under the name of politics in liberal modernity. What I call “the metonymic abuses of

modernity”—including the metonymization of the political by the state, of the constitution by constitutional laws as well as by the bourgeois constitutional framework, and of legitimacy by legality—are the substitutions of an empty and formal part for the whole, that pile layer upon layer of impersonal and dead political existence, whose historico-polemical potential has expired. Schmitt’s enterprise boils down to clearing away, by means of political-phenomenological reduction, these reified and oppressive strata in order to leave enough breathing space for the subjectivity that invests them with meaning (animates or activates them) and that is, at the same time, forgotten and lost underneath them (Chapter 5). In contrast to Gillespie’s thesis, this critical exercise is not fixated on a purely negative assessment of all actually existing and potentially plausible political arrangements but boasts a positive and constructive side, which I explore in the following chapter on “political reduction to constitutive subjectivity.” Here, I contend that the categories “political will” and “political consciousness” are much more than mere metaphysical vestiges; they are the products of postreductive attempts at theorizing the subjects, however obscured, who determine every political constellation (Chapter 6).

It would not have been sufficient to outline the contours of Schmittian ontology and to recast his critique of political modernity in phenomenological terms without demonstrating how this ontology could inform political life in its actuality. In Chapter 7, I locate the living and substantive form in politics by rethinking multiculturalism on the basis of *complexio oppositorum* (the complex of opposites) that determines the political form of Catholicism in Schmitt’s early work. A reinvigorated multiculturalism, inspired by Schmitt, will neither predelineate the terrain for political engagements, nor project culturally specific attitudes and beliefs onto the contrived sphere of universality, but will grow out of a tense and agonistic negotiation of cultural coexistence, refusing to synthesize the radically pluralistic arrangement in one concept. In sum, these living forms of political existence owe their vivacity to their provenance from collective life that imparts to them its own plasticity and fluidity.

The same sort of fluidity pertains to politics as a hermeneutic endeavor, whereby changes in political existence precipitate new determinations and interpretations of the vague evaluative concepts, such as “danger,” “emergency,” and so on. It is deeply erroneous to draw a strict line of demarcation between the active constitution-making capacity and the passive routine of interpretation, and, more specifically, to deplore those judges, whom certain American politicians dub “activist.” In doing so, one fails to realize that every interpretation is already an existential decision, which is necessarily

active, transformative, and reconstituting. Since the law does not—indeed, cannot—interpret and apply itself, interpretation becomes one of the most crucial loci of the political, where the hermeneutical decisions of concrete subjects “activate” the impersonal legal and political structures, often transgressing the norm (Chapter 8).

The multiplication of political interpretations self-legitimated by sovereign decisions denies the validity of positive legality, on the one hand, and the transhistorical truth of natural law, on the other. The collapse of the old transcendental certainties and the indefinite proliferation of hermeneutical acts in their place are signs of the postmetaphysical situation, since, in the words of Gianni Vattimo, “hermeneutics is not a philosophy but the enunciation of historical existence itself in the age of the end of metaphysics.”¹³ Political hermeneutics, in turn, does much more than enunciate the intensely political nature of historical existence; its boldness lies in the subsumption of the question concerning the meaning of Being—ontology as a whole—under the question of the specific meaning of the political. With Nietzschean flair, Schmitt will have subscribed to the claim that the hermeneutics of Being is not yet fully conscious of itself as the interpretation of the political relying, in keeping with Heidegger’s philosophy, on phenomenology and existentialism: phenomenology, since it is only through the appearing of individual beings that Being discloses itself, and existentialism, since Being gives itself to a particular kind of being—the existent human being, *Dasein*—for whom alone the meaning of Being presents itself as a question. Political phenomenology and political existentialism are, thus, the entwined “royal roads” to political ontology that, far from constituting an optically circumscribed region, surpass the depth and the scope of Being as such.

Notes

1. Transcript No. 2161, “Interrogation of Carl Schmitt by Robert Kempner (III),” in *Telos* 72, Summer 1987, p. 105.

2. Jeffrey Olick, *In the House of the Hangman: The Agonies of the German Defeat (1943–1949)* (Evanston, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 306. Likewise, in the end of the last interrogation, answering Kempner’s question regarding his plans for the future, Schmitt replies, “I will retreat into the security of silence” (qtd. in PTII 1).

3. CT 265.

4. The most blatant example of this approach is Colin Wright, *Agents, Structures, and International Relations: Politics as Ontology* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

5. Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Center of Political Ontology* (London and New York: Verso, 2000).
6. For a helpful analysis on Lefort's phenomenologically inspired political philosophy, see Bernard Flynn's, *The Philosophy of Claude Lefort: Interpreting the Political* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2005).
7. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology* (London and New York: Routledge, 1969), p. 418.
8. Quoted in Gopal Balakrishnan, *The Enemy: An Intellectual Portrait of Carl Schmitt* (London and New York: Verso, 2002), p. 113.
9. Karl Löwith, *Martin Heidegger and European Nihilism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), p. 215.
10. Richard Wolin, "Carl Schmitt, Political Existentialism, and the Total State," in *The Terms of Cultural Criticism: The Frankfurt School, Existentialism, Poststructuralism*, ed. Wolin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).
11. Michael Allen Gillespie, "The Search for Immediacy and the Problem of Political Life," in *A Companion to Phenomenology and Existentialism*, ed. Hubert Dreyfus and Mark Wrathall (Malden, MA and Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 543–544.
12. Mathias Schmitz, *Die Freund-Feind-Theorie Carl Schmitts: Entwurf und Entfaltung* (Köln: Westdeutsche Verlag, 1965).
13. Gianni Vattimo, "The Age of Interpretation," in *The Future of Religion*, ed. S. Zabala (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 45.