

# *From the Concept of the Political to the Event of Politics*

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“From the concept of the political to the event of politics”: as always, the title is a promise and a contract. In keeping with this titular undertaking, which outlines a certain itinerary or trajectory, the reader might expect to be guided from the abstract sterility of the concept to the concrete level of political events as they unfold in history, from a higher to a lower level of analysis, from the general to the singular, from the speculative (in the Hegelian sense) to the positively demonstrable.<sup>1</sup> Right from the outset, let us be clear on the terms of the contract by noting that these expectations will be frustrated for three reasons. First, the concept of the political in Schmitt is neither sterile nor abstract, given that it is existentially embodied and lived in a determinate enemy/friend opposition. Second, the meaning of the event diverges from the colloquial sense of a mere historical occurrence and hinges on the thinking of *Ereignis* and *événement*—the event of appropriation and expropriation in Heidegger and Derrida. Third, there is, strictly speaking, no transition from one to the other, but only an eventalization of the concept itself, a structural opening of the concept onto the event, a premonition of the ungraspable and the extra-conceptual in the concept that remains “of the political” only to the extent that it is not identical to itself, as Adorno might put it. It is doubtful, then, whether this

1. On the historical background of the much debated distinction between politics and “the political,” see Kari Palonen, “Politics or the Political? An Historical Perspective on a Contemporary Non-Debate,” *European Political Science* 6 (2007): 69–78. I concur with Palonen that the abstract privileging of the political “provides the scholar with an excuse to retain a pro-political attitude while remaining disinterested in the actions of politicians” (p. 78). This disengagement, however, does not mark Schmitt’s political philosophy discussed in the article.

presumed transition would ever leave its point of departure, or whether the emergence of the event in the concept would supplant the latter from the inside. If the second alternative applies, then the destination of this movement will have been already included in its point of departure in the guise of the concept of the political that does not ideally coincide with itself but anticipates its internal disarticulation by the event.

### *A Philosophical Primer:*

#### *Snapshots of the Event in Heidegger and Derrida*

Without denying the complexity and the heterogeneity of the contemporary philosophies of the event, I propose to map them on the axis running from appropriation to expropriation. The paradigm cases for the two extremes of this continuum are Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida, who, largely, fuel the current interest in the notion of the event. Most emblematically, Heidegger's second *magnum opus*, *Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis)*, translated as *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)*, both thematizes and traces its own sources back to the event (*Ereignis*). Heidegger breaks the German word for the event into *Er-ignis* only to supplement its strict etymology, its derivation from *eräugen* ("to bring into view or come into view"<sup>2</sup>), with the semantic (though not etymological) sense of that which is one's own, *eigen*.<sup>3</sup> Henceforth, the event will carry ownness within itself and will elliptically designate the event of appropriation. There are no significant contributions to philosophy that do not proceed from this event, which appropriates the first, essentially Greek philosophical origin born in the thought of the pre-Socratics, Plato, or Aristotle and, at the same time, brings into view the second origin, where conceptual philosophy reverts into "inceptual thinking," which, alone, is in the position to encounter the first beginning.<sup>4</sup>

In *Being and Time*, the phenomenological dimension of the event of appropriation, of "bringing into view" and, thereby, providing a non-transcendental condition of possibility for phenomenality, is interpretation

2. Richard Polt, *The Emergency of Being: On Heidegger's Contributions to Philosophy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2006), p. 73.

3. "...the *er-* in *Ereignis* has the function of stressing and putting forth the movement of *eigenen* in *-ignis*." Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly, "Translators' Foreword," in Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)*, trans. Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1999), p. xx. See also Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1999), p. 117.

4. Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy*, p. 40.

(*Auslegung*), which dispenses to the faculty of understanding what is its own, since “in it the understanding appropriates understandingly that which is understood by it.”<sup>5</sup> What this means is that, although phenomena, such as sights, sounds, and so forth, are given to us already imbued with meaning, the initial pre-interpretation is incomplete without the appropriative grasp of understanding that engages in the hermeneutics of the given and draws out what is implicit in it. Heidegger further recognizes that, more often than not in everyday life, the initial pre-understanding does not pass into an explicit appropriative interpretation and, therefore, does not give rise to the event. His code word for the inauthentic arrest of the phenomenological hermeneutic is *Gerede*, idle talk, which “is the possibility of understanding everything without previously making the thing one’s own.”<sup>6</sup> In the public world of “the they” (*das Man*), knowledge circulates like an empty rumor that is on everyone’s lips but belongs to no one in particular. And it is this inauthenticity of *Gerede* that becomes one of the sites wherein deconstruction sets itself to work as the inversion of *Ereignis* into the event of *expropriation*, the displacement of the very propriety of the proper, and the inflection of appropriation with the improper and the inappropriable.

Derrida’s argument advances in a sequence of carefully planned steps. In order to prepare the scene for the inversion of the Heideggerian event, he demonstrates that the most proper is, at the same time, the most singular, idiomatic, and, therefore, necessarily inappropriable, abyssal. *Ereignis* is, thus, consigned to the abyss of singularity it strives toward: “It is therefore in the abyss of the proper [*dans l’abîme du propre*] that we are going to try to recognize the impossible idiom of the signature.”<sup>7</sup> *Ereignis* in abyss (*Ereignis en abîme*) seduces with “the allure of the inappropriable event [*l’allure d’un événement inappropriable*]<sup>8</sup> that indefinitely defers the situation, in which one would find oneself in absolute proximity to oneself, the situation every metaphysics of presence counts upon.<sup>9</sup> The paradox is that the event of appropriation is internally expropriated by its

5. Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Verlag, 1993), p. 148.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 169.

7. Jacques Derrida, *Signésponge/Signsponge*, trans. Richard Rand (New York: Columbia UP, 1984), p. 28.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 102.

9. Thus, in Jacques Derrida’s *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997), the property of *representamen* “is not to be *proper* [*propre*], that is to say absolutely *proximate* to itself (*prope, proprius*). The *represented* is always already a *representamen*” (p. 50). See also Derrida’s “White Mythology,” in

most extreme instantiation: by the absolutely proper, singular, and idiomatic (hence, inappropriate) “thing.”

Although appropriation and expropriation are not bound together by a dialectical logic of the antithetical co-belonging, the latter hypostatizes a particular moment of the former. In and of itself, Heidegger’s *Ereignis* does not grasp something definitively present but performatively creates the second beginning of philosophy precipitated by the “inceptual” leap that does not land on any preexisting terrain. It follows that groundlessness, an abyssal and vertiginous bottomlessness, characterizes *Ereignis* well before its deliberate expropriation. A simple inversion or re-valorization (presaged, from the start, by that which is inverted) does not suffice, which is why Derrida drowns the difference between the proper and the improper in the indifference of immemorial expropriation by the sponge, one of many deconstructive metaphors for writing: “Insofar as it ingests, absorbs, and interiorizes everything, proper or not [*du proper comme du non-propre*], the sponge is certainly ‘ignoble.’”<sup>10</sup> To be sure, the sponge does not entirely erase the difference between the proper and the improper but makes it unstable, porous, and undecidable. Its “ignobility,” thus, symbolizes the meta-impurity of the opposition between the pure and the impure, between the authentically grasped and the inauthentically pre-interpreted, and, finally, between the events of appropriation and expropriation.

***There is no such thing as the “political sphere”!***

What presents itself as the unbounded versatility of the concept of the political, which may be derived from any other field (whether economic, religious, or otherwise) provided that the intensity of antagonisms within it reaches a boiling point, constitutes, precisely, the kind of opening onto the event that I have begun to chart above. Schmitt writes: “The political can derive its energy from the most varied human endeavors, from the religious, economic, moral, and other antitheses. It does not describe its own substance [*es bezeichnet kein eigenes Sachgebiet*] but only the intensity [*nur den Intensitätsgrad*] of association or dissociation of human beings . . .”<sup>11</sup> George Schwab generally translates the German *Sachgebiet*

*Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1982), especially the part titled “The Flowers of Rhetoric,” pp. 245–57.

10. Derrida, *Signésponge/Signsponge*, p. 72.

11. Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 38.

as “domain,” but in this instance he prefers to render it as “substance,” and does so for obvious reasons. Is it conceivable that a book treating the concept of the political would deny the existence of an autonomous political sphere, field, or domain? Isn’t it the explicit task of the text at hand to delimit such a sphere, separating it from what is not political? Or else, what are we to make of Schmitt’s strange contention that the political parasitically inhabits other regions of human activity but lacks a domain of its own?

The difficulty with Schwab’s reading is that, on countless occasions, Schmitt polemically insists on the substantiveness and concreteness of the political, in contrast to liberal depoliticizations that go hand in hand with the evacuation of substance from politics. Moreover, we ought to remember that Schmitt is interested in the *concept* of the political and that it would be erroneous to equate this or any other concept with the sphere of activity it effectively enables. Even if we could demarcate a properly political *Sachgebiet*, such a domain would not coincide with its rigorously delineated concept. And it is this proper domain that is absent whenever we touch upon the subject of the political. Devoid of a playing field of its own, the concept under consideration shuns clear topographical distinctions, transgresses ontological boundaries, and, as a result, gains the plasticity expressed in its ability to dwell in and transmogrify all other domains, the ability exemplified in the “spongy” and absorbent *complexio oppositorum* (the complex of opposites) that distinguishes the political form generated by Roman Catholicism.<sup>12</sup> In other words, it fails to establish either an internal economy, broadly understood as a domicile, or an external economy with the spheres it inflects.

I would like to emphasize this necessarily unequal exchange corroborating Schmitt’s anti-economism, which, as we shall see, extends much deeper than its overt formulations in *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*, where the economic represents a simple negation of the political, the administration of men by things. In return for giving up the right to claim a domain of its own, the political comes to reside in all other domains as the intensity of oppositions peculiar to them. In expropriating itself, it expropriates the spheres it inhabits, since above a particular degree of

12. Cf. Carl Schmitt, *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*, trans. G. L. Ulmen (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), p. 7; and Michael Marder, “Carl Schmitt’s ‘Cosmopolitan Restaurant’: Culture, Multiculturalism, and *Complexio Oppositorum*,” *Telos* 142 (Spring 2008): 29–47.

antagonism they cease to be moral, religious, economic, etc., and instead become political. That which has no proper terrain of its own spirits away the basis or the ground of other regional ontologies that are always, to some extent, economic in their capacity as regions or domiciles. Similarly, depoliticization is not a historical accident that befalls the political, but its “truth,” an idiosyncratic expression of expropriation, to which the political non-sphere is not immune.

The aneconomic relation of the political to various zones of human activity and the absence of a political topography *proper* should not lead us to the conclusion that Schmitt’s thinking is sloppy or that it exhibits conceptual laxity. On the contrary, *The Concept of the Political* is a quest for the “specific meaning [*spezifischen Sinnes*]” of politics.<sup>13</sup> As such, it stands for a radical continuation of Kant’s Copernican turn in the history of twentieth-century philosophy and, especially, in the rich phenomenological tradition extending from Husserl to Heidegger and Derrida. To concentrate on the *meaning* of Being, as Heidegger does, or to investigate the “specific meaning” of the political, as Schmitt proposes to do, is to recognize the naiveté of the presumably objective treatments of Being and of the political. Positively put, it is to sensitize oneself to the problems of interpretation (and, by implication, the appropriative *Ereignis*) pertaining to whatever comes under the light of investigation and to reassert the ultimate irreducibility of the interpreter, be it Dasein—a being who raises the question of Being—or the sovereign who gauges the levels of intensity and determines those critical points, not objectively set once and for all, where the quantitative surge in hostility accomplishes a qualitative shift toward politicization in the categories of collective existence.

Thus, Schmitt frames his discussion of the political in a kind of negative ontology, in the non-space or, better yet, in the displacement of different domains of human action. As a result of this originary dislocation, that which is purely political, namely, the carefully distilled intensity of antagonism, is neither empirically accessible outside the spheres it eventually transforms, nor is it transcendently given in the manner of Kant’s *a priori* conditions of possibility. That is not to say that “possibility” does not play a crucial role in Schmitt’s theory of the political, with its presupposition of the real and ever-present possibility of war (*die reale Möglichkeit des Kampfes*) and a prospect of the physical annihilation of the enemy, without

13. Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, p. 72.

which politics is insipid and meaningless.<sup>14</sup> Just as Heidegger, who privileges possibility he posits “higher than actuality” in *Being and Time*,<sup>15</sup> Schmitt substantiates the existential character of his philosophy by accentuating the possible.<sup>16</sup> One implication of the political existential stance is that there is no such thing as a separate political sphere because every sphere is *potentially* political or politicizable thanks to a possible increase in the intensities of association and dissociation structuring it.<sup>17</sup> But, in line with the political hermeneutic commitment, this condition of possibility can be retrieved only retrospectively, *a posteriori*, after the interpretive decision on the sphere’s transfiguration has been made. That is why no liberal depoliticization can do away, *in toto*, with the political, which is not a domain amenable to being supplanted, but the overarching principle of displacement and, hence, the dynamic governing depoliticization as well.

In this context, it is instructive to recall Schmitt’s famous statement in *Political Theology* that “[a]ll significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts.”<sup>18</sup> Along with the claim that “all political concepts, images, and terms have a polemical meaning,”<sup>19</sup> it completes the structural *displacement of political conceptuality* in two distinct ways. On the one hand, political concepts do not appear *sui generis* but derive from the theological sphere in a definite process of dislocation called “secularization.” (Now, if the first of the four major stages of neutralization and depoliticization identified by Schmitt is the theological, then the entire succession of stages begins with the restoration of the origin, a negation of the negation, de-secularization, or, at least,

14. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

15. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, p. 38.

16. In *Heidegger and the “Jews”*, Jean-François Lyotard, having acknowledged a certain proximity between Schmitt and Heidegger, hurries to distance the latter from the former, with the excuse that political theology does not go far enough in the direction of “a rigorous deconstruction of the categories of ontotheology and politics.” Lyotard, *Heidegger and the “Jews”*, trans. Andreas Michel and Mark S. Roberts (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 72. As we shall see, Derrida perpetuates this way of treating Schmitt that remains oblivious to the existential character of his political thought that is not tethered to its “Catholic” sources.

17. Joseph Bendersky notes that this potential politicizability of every sphere is intended to combat the liberal contention that there are neutral or apolitical spheres. See Bendersky, *Carl Schmitt: Theorist for the Reich* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1983), p. 88.

18. Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), p. 38.

19. Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, p. 30.



a retreat from the political back to its displaced source.) On the other hand, the polemical meaning of political concepts harkens back not to other concepts, such as the theological, but to the other of the concept: the strategic, situational context, wherein we sustain concrete confrontations with the enemies or forge alliances and association with the friends. The dual displacement of the political by other concepts and by the other of the concept points toward the event both in the everyday sense of a singular happening or occurrence—of everything that falls under the heading of the polemical context—and in the special sense of expropriation that reduces to pure nonsense all appeals to the “pure origination” of the political, renders impossible its emplacement, circumscription, economization, or domestication, and undermines a permanently valid demarcation of the variegated fields of human activity.

An imprint of the event of the political is discernible in the quotation marks to which Schmitt confines the domains transfigured by a quantitatively produced qualitative shift: “The often quoted sentence of quantity transforming into quality has a thoroughly political meaning. It is an expression of the recognition that from every ‘domain’ the point of the political is reached and with it a qualitative new intensity of human groupings [*daß vom jedem ‘Sachgebiet’ aus der Punkt des Politischen und damit eine qualitative neue Intensität menschlicher Gruppierung erreicht ist*].”<sup>20</sup> The quotation marks around “Sachgebiet” that are missing from the English translation betray the expropriation of every “domain” at the point of the political (*der Punkt des Politischen*), where each sphere loses its identity *qua* the theological, the economic, the moral, etc., and where it ceases to exist as a sphere the moment it becomes politically charged. The event of expropriation aporetically combines extreme indeterminacy, insofar as it may be reached “from every ‘domain’ [*vom jedem ‘Sachgebiet’*],” and utmost determination emanating from the precise turning point of politicization and from the particular criteria that distinguish the political from the “relatively independent endeavors [i.e., domains] of human thought and action [*relativ selbständigen Sachgebieten menschlichen Denkens und Handelns*].”<sup>21</sup> If Schmitt declares the *relative* independence of these non-political spheres, it is in order to point out that, at any moment, they may undergo a process of politicization and that, therefore, they rely on the political in the last instance.

20. Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, p. 62 (translation modified).

21. *Ibid.*, p. 25.



Of course, this reliance is exceptionally risky, in that instead of supplying a secure foundation, the political withholds even the least topographic supports from whatever is relatively independent of it.<sup>22</sup> The point of the political, like the point of the decision that lies at its core, is an instant of the greatest risk, an experience of groundlessness, of being admitted into a region that is not a region. The political is not the most basic stratum propping up the rest of the edifice of human thought and action, but a veritable earthquake that disarticulates, unhinges, or un-grounds the latter. Curiously enough, the abyssal character of the political is metonymically reduced to a phase of *nomos*'s decoupling from land appropriation and its transposition onto the uncertainty of the sea: "On the sea, fields cannot be planted and firm lines cannot be engraved. Ships that sail across the sea leave no trace [*hinterlassen keine Spur*]. 'On the waves there is nothing but waves'."<sup>23</sup> As a disruption in the ideal co-implication of order and orientation (*Ordnung* and *Ortung*), the anarchic spatiality of the marine trace-erasure, like the political itself, cannot be forced into a determinate system of enclosures, regional divisions, and appropriations. Better than the land, the sea lives up to the political event of radical expropriation.

Notwithstanding the acute deconstructive sensibility he exhibits in *The Politics of Friendship*, Derrida misses, precisely, the non-regional and, in some measure, extra-conceptual determination of the political in Schmitt, when he writes: "it [Schmitt's discourse] offers a pure and rigorous conceptual theory of the political, of the specific region of that which is properly and without polemical rhetoric called *the* 'political,' the politicity of the political. Within this region, in the enclosure proper to a *theoretical* discourse, all examples, all facts, all historical contents should thus issue in *knowledge*..."<sup>24</sup> Needless to say, in Schmitt's discourse, the political does not and cannot be confined to a specific region, though it does feature a specificity of meaning or sense. In addition to this obvious lapse in his interpretive vigilance, Derrida willfully forgets the impure

22. While Heinrich Meier, in *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss: The Hidden Dialogue*, trans. J. Harvey Lomax (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1995), is right to distinguish the political from all other "relatively independent domains," he is somewhat careless in attributing a "fundamental" (p. 16) dimension to it, the dimension that ought to be taken with more than one grain of salt, as the current analysis shows.

23. Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of Jus Publicum Europaeum*, trans. G. L. Ulmen (New York: Telos Press, 2003), pp. 42–43.

24. Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London: Verso, 1997), p. 117.

and “improper” genealogy of the concept of the political issuing from its theological (thus, non-political) origins, with this impropriety magnified manifold by the subversive role of the political in the expropriation of the remaining domains of human action. As for the usual meta-accusation that the polemical gist of political images and concepts does not make itself known in the Schmittian thinking of the political, it is not hard to read between the lines *who* Schmitt’s enemy is and *against whom* his theory is formulated, namely, the liberal democratic model of state administration predicated on the practices of economic management.

In light of these corrections and rejoinders, how is it still possible to insist on the purity and propriety of something that lacks a particular domain and is, perhaps, allergic to the logic of appropriation as such? Pursuing this line of thought, we will uncover nothing more and nothing less than Derrida’s own polemical program. It is not by chance that in this seemingly innocent depiction of Schmitt’s political philosophy he includes words with the heaviest metaphysical luggage, “pure” and “proper,” that he has submitted to a stringent deconstructive reading, as early as in *Of Grammatology* and *Margins of Philosophy*. But we will need to wait for a rather long time—more than one hundred pages of *The Politics of Friendship*, to be exact—before he puts his cards on the table, disclosing the motivation for imposing these terms on Schmitt and for violently forcing him into the “enclosure proper to a *theoretical* discourse.” Without further ado, this motivation has to do with what Derrida puts forth as an “interesting hypothesis,” according to which “Schmitt would . . . become the last great metaphysician of politics, the last great spokesperson of European political metaphysics.”<sup>25</sup> The enclosure of the political concept Derrida imputes to the non-place of the political will, henceforth, mirrors the closure (*clôture*) of metaphysics, where Schmitt replaces Heidegger, who occupies the place of Nietzsche as “the last great metaphysician” responsible for accomplishing, without ever completing, the final reversal of Platonism. Such a reading overlooks not only the clearest of indications that the political does not have a particular sphere of its own but also that Schmitt has condensed and slotted metaphysics in its entirety into the second stage of neutralization and depoliticization in his 1929 essay. To be more precise, Derrida is only partly correct in ascribing a metaphysical program to Schmitt who radically expropriates the political, yet finally

25. Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, p. 247.

puts it in the service of guarding and protecting that which is one's own for the purpose of preserving, at any price, "one's own form of existence [*der eigenen Art Existenz*]"<sup>26</sup> in the face of the existential threat stemming from the enemy. To absolve Schmitt of the charges that he clandestinely practices a garden variety of metaphysics, one would need to contend with this mixed heritage and to recommit a Schmittian politics to the event of expropriation constitutive of the political.

***Schmitt's Anti-economism Revisited:  
Nomos/Appropriation, Politics/Expropriation***

By now, Schmitt's anti-economism is, generally, a jaded topic that fails to surprise anyone acquainted, however superficially, with the arguments of *Roman Catholicism* and *The Concept of the Political*. In the mind-set of the liberal democratic governance, the economic supplies a blueprint for the impersonal pursuit of politics devoid of danger and risk, ostensibly free from the element of decision-making, which becomes synonymous with tyranny, and, at the extreme, disbanding the last shreds of representation into the sheer presence of things.<sup>27</sup> The catalogue of these merciless attacks on economism would not be complete without mentioning that, for Schmitt, the economic is the final and, perhaps, the most decisive stage of neutralization and depoliticization and that it is intimately tied to the despotism of technology that militates against the possibility of spiritual life. To sum up, his anti-economism reflects an anti-anti-political stance, an assault on everything that weakens political concepts and phenomena.

A mere invocation of the critique of presence directed against the economic predominance of things and warily moderated with the rejection of abstract, disembodied concepts (e.g., "humanity") should have sufficed in the initial defense of Schmitt against the charges of smuggling heavy metaphysical luggage into his theory of the political. The notions of the human and the thing, two facets that, along with the animal, make up the architecture of Aristotle's metaphysics,<sup>28</sup> elicit some of the bitterest scorn from Schmitt in his early work. As though this were not enough, on the positive side, his thinly veiled attack on metaphysics entails the avowal

26. Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, p. 27.

27. Schmitt, *Roman Catholicism and the Political Form*, p. 20.

28. The notion of the thing is a cornerstone of the Aristotelian metaphysical edifice, where the animal is "the living thing" and the human is "the political animal," or, by implication, "the political living thing."

of “concrete representation” and of its corollary, “invisible visibility,”<sup>29</sup> which resembles the Derridian trace, an absent presence or present absence muddling the purity of philosophical constructs. Be this as it may, even if Schmitt could be interpreted as advocating a proto-Arendtian autonomy or primacy of the political vis-à-vis the social and the economic,<sup>30</sup> he would not be satisfied with a simple inversion of the Marxist base-superstructure model, given that the political is not one domain among others, indispensable for the continuation of the life of spirit as it might be. Rather, we must assume the task of reconfiguring the relationship between the political and the economic, in a way that leaves direct determinations and even overdeterminations behind. In the course of this reconfiguration, I will show that the lines of demarcation between the two also pass at the heart of the Heideggerian and Derridian meditations on the event of appropriation and expropriation.

Abstractly, then, politics is the antithesis of economy; the tacit goal of the analysis of economism is to rescue the realm of “spirit” from the predominance of things that triggers the all too familiar scheme of reification.<sup>31</sup> Concretely, however, there two obstacles in the path of this easy solution. First, economic oppositions can become political, if they are imbued with an appropriate intensity of antagonism. As Schmitt puts it in *The Concept of the Political*, “[w]hen it reaches a certain quantity, economic property, for example, becomes obviously social (or more correctly, political) power, *propriété* turns into *pouvoir*, and what is at first only an economically motivated class antagonism [*Klassengegensatz*] turns into a class struggle [*Klassenkampf*] of hostile groups.”<sup>32</sup> Note the subtle irony of this example: the embodiment of the economic, the ultimate receptacle of appropriation—property—is expropriated *qua* property, becomes “improper,” and turns into power under the sway of the political transformation. This kind of expropriation does not facilitate the Hegelian synthesis

29. Cf. Carl Schmitt, “The Visibility of the Church: A Scholastic Consideration,” an appendix to *Roman Catholicism and the Political Form*, pp. 47–59.

30. This is the position Eckard Bolsinger defends in his *The Autonomy of the Political: Carl Schmitt’s and Lenin’s Political Realism* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001).

31. John McCormick does well to compare Schmitt’s critique of economic rationality with the Lukácsian notion of reification, even if this comparison overlooks some of the complexities involved in the anti-economism of the former thinker. See McCormick, *Carl Schmitt’s Critique of Liberalism: Against Politics as Technology* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999), esp. pp. 57ff.

32. Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, p. 62.

of two previously antithetical terms but reveals that even the most neutralized category is amenable to a sudden politicization. The opposition of the political and the non-political is subordinate to the antagonism constitutive of the political that erases this very opposition. Second, there can be no symmetry in the relation between economy and politics because, unlike the former, the latter has no domain of its own and, consequently, does not partake of the most basic and definitive economic operation, the act of appropriation. This absence of symmetry confirms, once again, that the political and the economic will not constitute an economy, not even the economy of oppositional relationality and mutual negation that inheres in every antithesis. Their antithetical interrelation will be understood as thoroughly historical and polemical, not as an ontological given.

Before proceeding any further, it is important to realize that Schmitt does not take for granted the meaning of economy but, instead, approaches the subject matter in a meticulously philosophical fashion guided by the question “What is the economic?” In Greek, economy is a composite term conjoining the “*nomos*” and the “*oikos*” (the house) in a combination that is more or less tautological: “. . . the unity of *nomos* is only the unity of the *oikos*.”<sup>33</sup> Much will depend, therefore, on the interpretation of *nomos* that holds the key to the unity and the essence of the economic.

Schmitt considers the *nomos* of eco-nomy in the *Materials for the Constitutional Theory*, amassed between 1924 and 1954. He isolates three pertinent bases of the Greek noun, from *nehmen* (to take or appropriate) through *teilen* (to divide or distribute) to *weiden* (literally, pasturage, or productive work).<sup>34</sup> Appropriation is the most fundamental etymological and conceptual stratum of the economic *nomos*, one that makes possible distribution and production alike in the tripartite economy of “economy.” By the same token, it is the most forgotten of the three meanings of *nomos* (forgotten to the point of utter repression), whose descent into oblivion accelerates in the aftermath of the eighteenth-century Industrial Revolution. Parallel to the forgetting of Being in Heidegger, the question of

33. Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth*, p. 345.

34. Carl Schmitt, “Appropriation/Distribution/Production: Toward a Proper Formulation of Basic Questions of any Social and Economic Order,” trans. G. L. Ulmen, *Telos* 95 (Spring 1993): 54–55. Much of these reflections on the meaning of *nomos* are a condensed form of the systematic and monumental effort preserved in *The Nomos of the Earth*. The semantic list of the meanings of *nomos* is far from exhausted here, for it can have a plethora of “derived” senses, from “a mere rule” to the opposite of *physis*. Cf. Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth*, pp. 67ff.

appropriation, responsible for the event of the economic par excellence, migrates to the blind spot of utopian socialism (Proudhon) and to the outskirts of liberalism obsessed with the truncated and perverted sequence of the production and distribution of wealth.<sup>35</sup> Conversely, Marx's ingenuity lies in his recovery of this repressed economic stratum on the edge of its transformation into the political, that is, in the recuperation of the principle of appropriation and the demand for the expropriation of the expropriators that, alone, lends credibility to radical *political* economy: "Marx . . . concentrates the whole weight of his attack on the expropriation of the expropriators, i.e., on the procedure of appropriation [*Vorgang des Nehmens*]. In place of the old right of plunder and the primitive land-appropriations of pre-industrial times, he substituted the appropriation of the total means of production."<sup>36</sup> This nuanced approach implies that the Schmittian attack on economism targets primarily the factors responsible for the impoverishment of the political potential of the economic, its reduction to the spheres of production and distribution, and, most recently, to sheer productivism driven by technological demands and by instrumental rationality.

What distinguishes production from distribution and, especially, from appropriation is that it does not require a great deal of decision-making, dissolving this capacity into the productive apparatus and into the general order of things. At the most "founded"—to resort to a Husserlian notion—ossified, and superficial level of production, which Marx considered to be the "inner abode" or the deeply buried source of the capitalist self-valorization of value, economic rationality is at its most material, "concerned only with things,"<sup>37</sup> preoccupied with that which can be appropriated but indifferent to the act of appropriation itself. The political, on the other hand, inevitably entails *Unsachlichkeit*. The English translation of this word in terms of "a lack of objectivity"<sup>38</sup> built into the subjective decision-making capacity is an obvious and correct one. Still, in a twist on the negative determination of political immateriality, *Unsachlichkeit* can also mean "unthingliness." The literal connotations of this term resonate with the idea that the political does not have a domain of its own, its proper *Sachgebiet*, its circumscribed realm of things (*Sachen*), for the sovereign

35. Ibid., p. 59.

36. Ibid., p. 62.

37. Schmitt, *Roman Catholicism and the Political Form*, p. 16.

38. Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, p. 32.

and constitution-making decisions cannot be entirely diffused in an impersonal field but are concentrated in a concrete will, whether individual or collective. And if the political is unthingly, then it *a priori* withdraws from the act of appropriation, assuming that only a thing can serve as the target for such an act.

Thus far, the trajectory of the argument easily falls prey to the tactical maneuvers Derrida finesses in *Of Spirit*, which juxtaposes Heidegger's definition of the thing as "worldless" to the world, which is always spiritual.<sup>39</sup> On this view, Schmitt has succumbed to an unquestioned metaphysical distinction between the spiritual (politics) and the spiritless (the economy) and has unambiguously taken sides in this artificial theoretical scaffold redolent of the crudest idealism. And yet, the idealist scenario is lopsided and cannot be attributed squarely to Schmitt; the political appears to be purely spiritual and immaterial only from the standpoint of economic rationality. A symptom of complexity in Schmitt's examination of the relationship between the spirit and the thing, metonymically designating the political and the economic, is his refusal to consider it as a simple binary opposition, let alone as the point of friction between a thesis and an antithesis.

The penultimate sentence of "The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations" readily furnishes the evidence for this complexity: "For life struggles not with death, spirit not with spiritlessness [*und der Geist nicht mit der Geistlosigkeit*]; spirit struggles with spirit, life with life, and out of the power of an integral understanding of this arises the order of human things [*die Ordnung der menschlichen Dinge*]."<sup>40</sup> I underline just two aspects of this incredibly fertile passage, which invites an otherwise interminable analysis: (1) There is never a standoff between spirit, the world, politics, on the one hand, and spiritlessness, the thing, the economy, on the other, seeing that any struggle they might be involved in will be asymmetrical and will take place as an inner division within spirit, the world, and so on, engulfing their opposites; (2) These inner splits and fissures of spirit against itself—the splits and fissures that galvanize the friend-enemy distinction at the heart of the political and that include the divergence of

39. Jacques Derrida, *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 47–48.

40. Carl Schmitt, "The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations," in *The Concept of the Political*, exp. ed., trans. George Schwab (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 96.



the political from the economic rationality—result in the order of human things, now transcribed not as *Sachen* but as *Dinge*. The barely perceptible linguistic shift from one appellation of the thing to the other signals that the political, too, possesses a material, “thingly” dimension and, further, conveys that the struggle of life against life and of spirit against spirit affects the thing itself subject to the clash between the order of human *Dinge* and the impersonal, administrative arrangement of *Sachen*. Such is the event of the thing divided against itself and, therefore, no longer resting in the self-identity of an inanimate entity abstractly opposed to spirit. It, thus, partakes of the event of politics, where the registry of what is expropriated includes, first and foremost, every stable and rigid identity of life, spirit, or the thing with itself and, additionally, the spatiality of the political devoid of its own region or domain.

What is the place of the concept in this framework? In the Hegelian dialectics, the concept longs for its identity with itself, awaiting that time outside of time when identity bridges and reconciles the identical and the non-identical across all the unrests and tribulations that befall Spirit in its historical instantiations. But the eventful expropriation of the firmly established conceptual identity infinitely postpones the moment of the concept’s final return to itself and, by implication, defers the end of the political division between friends and enemies, life and life, spirit and spirit. . . . The concept of the political, *der Begriff des Politischen*, will not be able to drive away this irreducible difference without, at the same time, annihilating the political “itself.” That of which it is a concept (the political) will prevent its closure and absolute homecoming, will put it on the brink of the event, will fatefully entwine the concept with its own expropriation. *Der Begriff des Politischen* is uncanny because, instead of grasping (*greifen*) the political, it permits the latter to grasp us, to push us to the extremity of the limit, where the sovereign decision on the exception and the real possibility of killing and being killed by the enemy grips and unsettles us, making life both interesting and dangerous, as Leo Strauss quips in his influential commentary on Schmitt. The existential concept is nothing if it is not an outlet for the event portending the possibility of its (and *our*) expropriation.

### ***How to remain faithful to the event of politics?***

In raising this question, I do not have in mind what Alain Badiou terms “fidelity to the event” that performatively produces the subjectivity of the

subject who affirms his or her commitment and allegiance to it. Badiou's "fidelity" still clings to the modality of the event that equally appropriates the subject and the "thinking of the situation": "To be faithful to an event is to move within the situation that this event has supplemented, by *thinking*... the situation 'according to' the event."<sup>41</sup> The situation is the ontological super-domain, indifferent and indeterminate, where the paths of the fourfold event of art, science, politics, and love are differentiated and charted. To be faithful, in this context, is to exercise the interpretive appropriation of the otherwise neutral situation thought "according to the event."

Returning to Schmitt, we face a much more difficult dilemma if we ask how it is possible to maintain, at the level of concrete material practices, the potential of the event of expropriation that blasts open the concept of the political. Does Schmitt himself succeed in the task of transferring or translating the ungrounded notion of the political, which does not belong in any particular sphere, to political practices that concretely embrace this non-belonging? This is where his political philosophy is vulnerable in the face of the Derridian diagnosis of its metaphysical entrenchment. It is as though Schmitt shrinks back from the structural displacement of the concept of the political and vacillates to the other extreme of the event (appropriation) when he subjects the friend-enemy distinction to the exigencies of preserving "one's own form of existence [*der eigenen Art Existenz*]."<sup>42</sup> In so doing, he perpetuates the intellectual inheritance that Spinoza, that scandalous seventeenth-century metaphysician, bequeathed to Western philosophy by embedding the abstract principle of identity in the concrete predicament of the living desire to maintain oneself in existence.<sup>43</sup>

In what follows I will advance a somewhat counterintuitive argument that Schmitt does not abandon the political event of expropriation, though he does misconstrue the concept of expropriation as nothing but the negative mode of appropriation. The misconstrual I am referring to

41. Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2002), p. 41.

42. Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, p. 27.

43. "Considered juridically, what exists as *political* power has value because it exists. Consequently, its 'right to self-preservation' is the prerequisite of all further discussions; it attempts, above all, to maintain itself in existence, 'in suo esse perseverare' (Spinoza)..." Carl Schmitt, *Constitutional Theory*, trans. Jeffrey Seitzer (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2008), p. 76.

occurs in the 1953 text on the basic questions of any social and economic order and, in particular, in the reflections on the Marxist “expropriation of the expropriators,” *die Expropriation der Expropriateure*: “If the essence of imperialism lies in the precedence of appropriation over distribution and production, then a doctrine such as the expropriation of expropriators is obviously the strongest imperialism because it is the most modern [*offenbar stärkster, weil modernster Imperialismus*].”<sup>44</sup> Besides exhibiting a narrow understanding of expropriation as the underside of appropriation, this passage fails to ask whether the event of the expropriation of the expropriators leaves the notion of appropriation intact, or whether it fatefully alters this notion and rids it of its imperialist overtones. Does appropriation remain the same before and after the expropriation of expropriators has taken place? I believe that it does not, if expropriation is not taken as yet another instant of appropriation but betokens a momentary paralysis of the economic order and the radical displacement of ownership in a way that remains faithful to the event of politics.

Despite a rushed dismissal of expropriation as “the most modern” form of imperialism, Schmitt’s political philosophy falls on the Derridian side of the event articulated in the suspension of the “proper.” When Schmitt solicits support from the Spinozan *conatus essendi*, does he not contravene his prior adherence to the political unfettered from various neutralizations and depoliticizations, including the metaphysical ones? More specifically, the exigencies of preserving “one’s own form of existence” need to be set in the context of *The Concept of the Political*, from which they issue. Immediately before he adopts this defensive attitude, Schmitt stresses the absence of a neutral third party that could adjudicate the existential conflict with the other: “These [conflicts] can neither be decided by a previously determined general norm [*in vorhaus getroffene generelle Normierung*] nor by the judgment of a disinterested and therefore neutral third party [*eines ‘unbeteiligten’ und daher ‘unparteiischen’ Dritten*].”<sup>45</sup> Instead, the decision is with the actual participants in the conflict and their judgment—“Only the actual participants can correctly recognize, understand, and judge the concrete situation and settle the extreme case of conflict”<sup>46</sup>—that remains existentially groundless insofar as it hinges neither on the externality of the general norm nor on the whim of a neutral third party.

44. Schmitt, “Appropriation/Distribution/Production,” p. 63.

45. Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, p. 27.

46. *Ibid.*

The unambiguous rejection of the norm, which is but an example of sham neutrality that surreptitiously caters to particular interests, cannot open an exception for the *conatus*, or the law of perseverance in one's essence, without, at the same time, stripping the parties to the conflict of their decision-making ability and re-establishing the primacy of the impersonal metaphysics of "substance." In contrast to Spinoza, Schmitt cannot afford to exempt the question concerning the preservation of one's own form of existence from the practices of decision-making. Now, the decision not to preserve this form is a dangerous one, and it may spell out the end of further political decisions. Yet, in the absence of a possibility to make this choice, a determinate general norm (e.g., the "natural law" of self-preservation) is reinstated only to annul the decision as such.<sup>47</sup> An event worthy of its name admits even the possibility of its own closure, a situation precluding a series of future existential decisions. Regardless of the content of what is decided in each case, the existential decision will have singled out and committed itself to one of at least two options. Otherwise, we are left with the "either" divorced from the "or," that is to say, with a predetermined program of action that is no longer political, for example, a normative and "necessarily antagonistic exclusion of concrete others."<sup>48</sup>

From the existential point of view, while the objective outcome might be the same, the different paths that have led to its actualization are crucial for its evaluation. When Schmitt derides the pacifist indecision, crystallized in the proclamation that a "people has nothing but friends," he concludes, in an extremely disconcerting way, that such political exhaustion will cause a "weak people [*ein schwaches Volk*]" to disappear.<sup>49</sup> But it certainly matters whether this disappearance has come about as a result of indecision or thanks to a deliberate choice not to preserve one's own form of existence,

47. Schmitt does not oppose pacifism to the natural law, as Robert Howse claims, but to the decision on whether one should maintain one's form of existence. See Howse, "From Legitimacy to Dictatorship—and Back Again: Leo Strauss's Critique of the Anti-Liberalism of Carl Schmitt," in *Law as Politics: Carl Schmitt's Critique of Liberalism*, ed. David Dyzenhaus (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1998), p. 66.

48. In a recent article, Matthias Fritsch imputes precisely such normativity to Schmitt. See Fritsch, "Antagonism and Democratic Citizenship (Schmitt, Mouffe, Derrida)," *Research in Phenomenology* 38 (2008): 174–97.

49. Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, p. 53. On my treatment of the "indecisive deracination of the political," see Michael Marder, "Carl Schmitt and the Risk of the Political," *Telos* 132 (Fall 2005): 5–24.

to expropriate oneself.<sup>50</sup> If the latter is the case, then the same outcome must be interpreted as a sign of strength, not of weakness, a sign that, in the long run, the meaningfulness of the most crucial political decision will be maintained. Therefore, in the spirit of Schmitt's political philosophy, which occasionally clashes with its letter, one needs to tackle not only the metaphysical-nationalist but also the moral residue in the foreboding value judgment passed on *ein schwaches Volk* by restricting it to instances of political fatigue that do not encompass the decision to let go of one's form of existence.

An obvious objection that might arise at this point would be that no one in the right frame of mind (i.e., having the good clearly in sight) is prepared consciously to give up one's *conatus essendi*, that which keeps one fast to existence. And, assuming this were possible, would the event of the political be nothing but an elaborate façade for a political suicide? This is the direction in which Derrida takes the thought of the event in *Rogues*, where he exposes the aporiae haunting the binaries of heteronomy and autonomy, absolute hospitality and sovereignty, the host's self-expropriating openness to alterity and the desire to occupy one's spot under the sun. The general heading for these aporiae is "autoimmunity," or the capacity of a living entity to "destroy, in an autonomous fashion, the very thing within it that is supposed to protect it against the other."<sup>51</sup> In other words, in the process of defending itself from the other, an entity can autonomously effectuate its own heteronomy and expose itself to alterity. And, conversely, what a skeptic might dub "political suicide," the autonomous choice to expropriate oneself, breathes life and meaning into the political decision on the form of one's own existence. (I submit, in passing, that the concept of the political is itself suicidal, in that, as a concept, it strives toward identity and reconciliation, negating the agonistic potential of the political.) The autonomous effectuation of heteronomy marks the maximal sense of the event of expropriation.

If we are attentive to the fine grain of Schmitt's text, we will observe that it is not political existence as such but the *form (Art)* of this existence that is preserved or rejected in the decisive confrontation with the enemy. To cling to an outmoded form of existence is to keep the old status quo on artificial respiration, long after the content from which it had arisen

50. For instance, when a minority group assimilates into the mainstream society.

51. Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2005), p. 125.

withered away. A regular revisiting of the decision prevents the dissociation of the content of existence from its form, in that it measures and assesses the changes in the former to ensure that the latter has not petrified or ossified. Here, the event of expropriation is diluted to its minimal sense, namely, a discarding of the old form of political existence that no longer corresponds to its content. As a result, the minimal event of expropriation forms a nexus between the second and the third “absolute meanings” of the constitution in *Constitutional Theory*: between the constitution as a living form or a “special type of political and social order . . . not detachable from . . . political existence” and as “the principle of the *dynamic emergence* of political unity, of the process of constantly renewed *formation* and *emergence* of this *unity* from a fundamental or ultimately effective *power* and *energy*.”<sup>52</sup> In the process of renewal that adumbrates the living connection between the form and the content of politics, expropriation is the obverse of the “emergence” and “formation” of new unities (forms of political existence) and the inalienable aspect of decisions on the constitution as a whole. It is necessitated by the fact that there is no proper, ideal, or trans-historical mode of life perfectly befitting a concrete political unity once and for all.

Does the concept, on its part, escape the fate of those unities that form and dissolve in the process of renewal? When Schmitt revisits the insights of his 1932 work *The Concept of the Political*, after World War II and outlines the shifts of political focus from clearly identifiable state actors to irregular partisan formations, he warns, precisely, against what he calls *Begriffsauflösung*, “concept dissolution,” in the treatment of the figure of the partisan: “In some cases, the re-interpretation leads to a general symbolization and dissolution of the concept [*allgemeinen Symbolisierung und Begriffsauflösung*]. Then, ultimately, any individualist and non-conformist can be called a partisan. . . . Such conceptual dissolutions are noteworthy signs of the times, which deserve a separate examination.”<sup>53</sup> The prospects of concept dissolution that sees the partisan turn into everything and nothing in particular are most salient at the time of the transition and, hence, in the emergence of a new *conceptual* unity. At this level, the minimal sense of expropriation is relevant to the concept of the political, permitting its form to adjust to the increasingly more significant partisan

52. Schmitt, *Constitutional Theory*, pp. 60–61.

53. Carl Schmitt, *Theory of the Partisan: Intermediate Commentary on the Concept of the Political*, trans. G. L. Ulmen (New York: Telos Press, 2007), pp. 18–19.

content and interspersing this period of adjustment with hyperbolic extensions and over-valuations of the partisan.

More importantly, the maximal sense of expropriation looms over the horizon of the concept's dissolution in excess of Schmitt's disparaging rhetoric. Far from being a mere "sign of the times,"<sup>54</sup> this dissolution, which is synonymous with the event of expropriation, is folded into the concept of the political that refuses to insulate itself in stable identities, constantly falls apart, and, thereby, turns itself into an outlet for the event of politics. Although it might appear that the concrete features of the partisan (including irregularity, greater mobility, and increased intensity of engagement<sup>55</sup>) threaten to replace the rigorously conceptual form with an obscure, energetic, and embodied figure, whose outlines are necessarily blurred, they are, to the contrary, a sign of the utmost fidelity to the concept that feeds off the logic of displacement, lacks a clearly identifiable domain of its own, and transgresses the boundaries of all other domains. With the partisan's rise to prominence, the concept of the political expropriates itself, autonomously effectuates its heteronomy, and welcomes the event of politics.

54. Preparing the ground for the argument advanced in *Theory of the Partisan*, Schmitt writes in *Constitutional Theory*: "One may generally say that the concept renders itself relative and pluralistic as soon as the consciousness of political existence undermines itself..." (p. 95). But what if, instead of being a symptom of such self-undermining, the relativization (and, indeed, the dissolution) of political concepts is necessary for their adjustment to a new content of such existence? After all, isn't it his contention that all concepts in the spiritual sphere are marked by an unavoidable pluralism?

55. Schmitt, *Theory of the Partisan*, p. 20.