

Carl Schmitt's "Cosmopolitan Restaurant": Culture, Multiculturalism, and *Complexio Oppositorum*

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Disentangling Complexio Oppositorum

Carl Schmitt's *Roman Catholicism and Political Form* (1923) features a term, the importance of which political philosophy has yet to fathom. This notion is *complexio oppositorum*, describing Catholicism as "a complex of opposites": "There appears to be no antithesis it [Roman Catholicism] does not embrace. It has long and proudly claimed to have united within itself all forms of state and government. . . . But this *complexio oppositorum* also holds sway over everything theological."¹ The striking depth and breadth of the complex are already evident in this brief passage. Broadly speaking, its elastic form—and more needs to be said on the subject of the exceptional, miraculous features of this *form*—seems to know no exceptions, since it embraces every antithesis within itself. In fact, Schmitt's very first sentence performatively inaugurates a *complexio oppositorum* where the loving connotations of the "embrace" coexist with the antagonistic sphere of the antitheses it welcomes. The inclusion of mutually exclusive entities does not synthesize them into a Hegelian unity but leaves enough space for them to retain the tension of oppositionality, which ought to be rigorously distinguished from the temporary torsion of a contradiction awaiting its resolution.

In his model of the *complexio*, Schmitt refrains from invoking a higher third that would mediate between the thesis and its antithesis. Rather, he shows how it occasions a breakdown of dialectics that routinely nullifies

1. Carl Schmitt, *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*, trans. G. L. Ulmen (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996), p. 7.

the very contradictions that constitute it and positivizes negativity.² Instead of neutralizing antagonisms, the complex of opposites nurtures and accentuates them; instead of totalizing or inserting the particulars under the umbrella of a single concept, it permits them to clash and derives its political energy from this enduring standoff. When in eighteenth-century metaphysics, God “became a concept and ceased to be an essence,” He “was removed from the world and reduced to a neutral instance vis-à-vis the struggles and antagonisms of real life [*des wirklichen Lebens*].”³ Conceptualization, therefore, idealizes the actuality of life, prompting an increasingly abstract epistemology to supplant practical ontology. Only the complex’s rejection of the neutralizing and, by implication, deadening subsumption of antagonisms in a conceptual unity preserves that of which they are but meager symptoms: within itself, it maintains life’s actuality (*Wirklichkeit*). (Let us note, parenthetically, that Schmitt himself is quite unambiguous with regard to his anti-Hegelian position,⁴ in light of which the gloriously Hegelian language utilized by many of his commentators is all the more surprising.⁵ Be this as it may, the promise of a form that embraces all antitheses without extinguishing them is nothing less than the promise of the political as such.)

The reference to the becoming-conceptual of God intimates the complex’s profundity, or the dimension of depth. Not only does it perpetually revitalize the political *dunamis* inherent in unalloyed oppositions, but it also “holds sway over everything theological.” Now, according to an earlier premise of *Political Theology*, “[a]ll significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts.”⁶

2. One could express this breakdown with the help of Walter Benjamin’s phrase “dialectics at a standstill,” except that, in Schmitt, the halt of dialectics is not equivalent to the Messianic cessation of all activity, but to its political unfolding outside the confines of resolvable contradictions.

3. Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, exp. ed., trans. George Schwab (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 90.

4. “Out of a spiritual promiscuity which seeks a Romantic or Hegelian brotherhood with Catholicism, as with so many other ideas and individuals, a person could make the Catholic *complexio* into one of many syntheses and rashly conclude that he had thereby construed the essence of Catholicism” (*ibid.*, pp. 8–9).

5. For example, “The Church’s *complexio oppositorum* thus incorporated a boundless adaptability. . . . The Church was a model of balance and moderation. It could allow the widest and most varied expression of ideas and forms, since it was assured of an absolute unity at its apex.” Renato Cristi, *Carl Schmitt and Authoritarian Liberalism: Strong State, Free Economy* (Cardiff: Univ. of Wales Press, 1998), p. 91.

6. Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), p. 38. One is tempted to note

Complexio oppositorum is, at the same time, one of such concepts and a more general link in the transition from the theological to the political signaled in the very title of the 1923 text that combines a singular religious doctrine with the universality of political form. Indeed, if books aspire to live up to their titles, Schmitt's *Roman Catholicism and Political Form* is a superb example of this aspiration, in that it announces, as though *a priori*, the unmediated conjunction of the theological and the political, the singular and the universal, which itself becomes possible within the framework of the religion it names and the form generated by this religion.

Despite the proviso that *complexio oppositorum* envelops all oppositions without exception, the form of the institution that embodies it—Roman Catholicism—is exceptional: “From the standpoint of the political idea of Catholicism, the essence of the Roman Catholic *complexio oppositorum* lies in a specific, formal superiority over the matter of human life [*in einer spezifisch formalen Überlegenheit über die Materie des menschlichen Lebens*] such as no other imperium has ever known.”⁷ I would like to defer the discussion of this extraordinary form for yet another moment, but will return to it after pointing out the consequences of the special status of the Catholic *imperium*. It is well known that, for Schmitt, the sovereign is “he who decides on the exception.”⁸ But the relation of *complexio oppositorum* to sovereignty complicates this definition, given that it is an exceptional arrangement that, like the Platonic *khora*, receives everything without exception. The complex politicizes its contents not by singling them out and, in a sovereign manner, decisively bestowing upon them the status of an exception, but by drawing out of them a uniquely political form. In other words, thanks to the mere incorporation of all antagonisms into this *imperium*, their political nature comes to the fore.

The theological analogue to the juridical concept of exception (*Ausnahme*) is a “miracle” (*Wunder*),⁹ and *complexio oppositorum* is nothing short of miraculous. One cannot help but experience a sense of wonder in the face of the unmediated way in which it brings together mutually

here that another famously “programmatically” statement of Schmitt is that “all political concepts, images, and terms have a polemical meaning” (Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, p. 30). After putting the two statements side-by-side, we cannot help but witness a spectacular *complexio oppositorum* in Schmitt’s own understanding of the political both as enchainment to a transfigured theological content and freed for the indeterminacy of polemics.

7. Schmitt, *Roman Catholicism*, p. 8, emphasis added.

8. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. 5.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

exclusive ideas and institutions. Yet, the evidence for its extraordinariness is not exhausted with this im-mediation. As Samuel Weber reminds us, the origins of the term that “in Schmitt’s lifetime was employed by the great Protestant historian Adolf von Harnack, who used it to explain, if not justify, the ‘anti-Roman affect,’” go back to alchemy.¹⁰ Schmitt’s polemical cooptation and re-coding of a syntagma used by a Protestant thinker who shared the antagonistic “affect” diagnosed in the first line of the 1923 text is a telling methodological exercise consistent with the emphasis on the polemical possibilities of all political concepts. What interests me in the genealogy of the *complexio*, however, is its alchemical origin, which, I believe, is neither an idle curiosity nor a sign of the nostalgia for the irrational that is said to haunt Catholic thought. Schmitt himself staunchly resists all romanticizing views of Roman Catholicism and the “dubious honor” of serving as a temporary shelter from the iron cage of modernity frequently conferred upon it. Why, then, even mention the (perhaps disavowed) alchemical roots of a crucial Schmittian concept that goes the greatest distance toward describing his political and theological ideal?

If we could designate a companion book to *Roman Catholicism*, no other candidate would stand out more than Carl Jung’s *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, which, as a supplement to Schmitt, has the potential of investing with new significance the classical psycho-politics that Plato formulates in *The Republic*. At the cusp of alchemical, psychological, and Christian symbolism, Jung corroborates Schmitt’s insights on the equal inclusion of masculine and feminine authority figures in Roman Catholicism that “is already a *complexio oppositorum*.”¹¹ Furthermore, both thinkers insist that the oppositions constitutive of the psychological and political domains alike must be concretely personified. Personification of the psychological forces is at the heart of Jungian “archetypes” (the *complexio* is explicitly mentioned in the chapter titled “Rex and Regina” [“King and Queen”]), just as the subjectivization of sovereignty furnishes

10. Samuel Weber, *Targets of Opportunity: On the Militarization of Thinking* (New York: Fordham UP, 2005), p. 28.

11. Carl G. Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis: An Inquiry into the Separation and Synthesis of Psychic Opposites in Alchemy*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1977), p. 374. Cf. Schmitt’s statement: “The pope is called the Father; the Church is the Mother of Believers and the Bride of Christ. This is a marvelous union of the patriarchal and the matriarchal, able to direct both streams of the most elemental complexes and instincts—respect for the father and love for the mother—toward Rome” (Schmitt, *Roman Catholicism*, p. 8).

the basis for Schmitt's rethinking of "representation." For the latter, the art of politics entails an ability to juggle the abstract and concrete elements included in any representation without sacrificing one of them for the sake of the other. The idea that the "pope is not the Prophet but the Vicar of Christ" reveals that, "[i]n contradistinction to the modern official, his position is not impersonal, because his office is part of the unbroken chain linked with the personal mandate and concrete person of Christ. This is truly the most astounding *complexio oppositorum*."¹² In a vicarious relation of power, the abstract and the concrete, the same and the other, are not mediately reconciled; they, rather, enter into a permanent standoff that generates the form of a personified representation, which, in the secularized political realm finds embodiment in the figures of the sovereign, the enemy, and the friend.¹³

The Living Form of Politics

We are now ready to face the marked "alchemical" origin of *complexio oppositorum*. My contention is that what motivates Schmitt to introduce this notion is a search—in which, arguably, the philosophical tradition has failed—for a *living form* that he will identify, first, with the remarkable "elasticity" of Roman Catholicism and, second, with the political as such. To reiterate, a living form is neither *a posteriori* imposed onto dead contents in a sort of dialectical magic that infuses inert matter with spirit, nor does it mirror the disquietude of life from a contemplative standpoint external to it. The "alchemical" moment bypasses all mediate and mimetic necessities and demonstrates that the Catholic *complexio oppositorum*, "despite its formal character, retains its concrete existence at once vital and yet rational to the *n*th degree [*die trotz ihres formalen Charakters in der konkreten Existenz bleibt, lebensvoll und doch im höchsten Maße rational ist*]."¹⁴ The miraculous and exceptional character of this form hides in the

12. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

13. This is the point that Sarah Pourciau misses when she writes that "[t]o propound an alternative theory of *qualitative* representation, he [Schmitt] draws on a Roman Catholic tradition of political theology which grounds the relation between a sovereign Church and a subject people in a Christian concept of mediation. The concept takes its energy from the paradigm of redemptive reconciliation—between human matter and divine form, earthly body and heavenly spirit—accomplished by Christ in the moment of the Word made flesh." See Sarah Pourciau, "Bodily Negation: Carl Schmitt and the Meaning of Meaning," *MLN* 120 (2005): 1066–90; here, p. 1082.

14. Schmitt, *Roman Catholicism*, p. 8.

fact that it *is* life itself and, simultaneously, a concrete representation of life in excess of what it represents.¹⁵

The elusiveness of the living form whose existence is (from the perspective of modern philosophy) as tenable as that of the alchemical “philosopher’s stone” is not unrelated to the historical tendency toward an abstracting neutralization of all substantive concepts. From Kant’s transcendental philosophy to Max Weber’s “sociology of law,” the hollowing out of form presents itself as a necessity to Western thought.¹⁶ This notion has been rendered procedural, calculable, transcendental, rationalized, “pure,” culminating in the organizational formality of democracy that, like technicity itself, comes to lack any “normative” content: “. . . if one regarded it from the perspective of some political program that one hoped to achieve with the help of democracy, then one had to ask oneself what value democracy itself had *merely as a form*.”¹⁷ The answer to this question is that, as a mere, emptied out—hence, dead—form, democratic political organization possesses only the instrumental value of pure means devoid of any ends. As a result, it faces two options: either a lapse into complete opportunism and populism, or a ruthless imposition of its voided form onto the contents that would not have assumed it otherwise. More often than not, these alternatives are combined in the Machiavellian fashion, in which the Empire currently endeavors to globalize this most inflexible of abstractions.

Such is the backdrop against which Schmitt’s recovery of the living form must assert itself. In *Political Theology*, its specifically living character is construed as a counter-thrust of the full and thick “form in its substantive sense [*der Form im substanziellen Sinne*]”¹⁸ that defies its modern “emptying out.” While Schmitt undertakes to fill out the political form with reference to the state, one could adapt his methodological insights to other institutions, such as culture, which is what I propose to do in the

15. In his early perceptive analysis of Schmitt in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1998), Giorgio Agamben writes: “Life. . . can in the last instance be implicated in the sphere of law only through the presupposition of its inclusive exclusion, only in *exceptio*” (p. 27). A more radical possibility would be that life itself is born of its exclusive inclusion in the *complexio oppositorum*, a form that falls on the same side as the exception from the norm, or from the “sphere of law.”

16. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, pp. 26–28.

17. Carl Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, trans. Ellen Kennedy (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), p. 24, emphasis added.

18. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. 26.

subsequent sections of this essay. Still in the context of a discussion of the state, substantiveness immediately connotes something living, namely, that the "state thus becomes a form in the sense of a living formation [*Der Staat wird also zu einer Form im Sinne einer Lebensgestaltung*]." ¹⁹ Qua formation (*Gestaltung*), the static form (*Form*) is set in motion, such that this setting-in-motion itself becomes the definitive moment of life. The process of forming is to be understood as the act of shaping the materials on which it works without ignoring the peculiarity of their content and the ineluctable oppositions dwelling in it. Indeed, "shaping" should be interpreted as the determination of oppositions, which is acutely aware of their substantive particularities and through which they get their first political bearings.

The distinction between the two forms of "form" prepares for a juxtaposition of the violent imposition of political order to the arrangement that unfolds from a certain way of living-together: "The state is the original power of rule, but it is so as the power of order, as the 'form' of national life [*Form' des Volkslebens*] and not an arbitrary force applied by just any authority."²⁰ It is, perhaps, unavoidable that the word *Volksleben*, "the life of the *Volk*," should sound alarm bells, especially in light of the place and the year of *Political Theology's* publication: Munich and Leipzig, 1934. Yet, this is not reason enough to dispose of the fruit of Schmitt's work, which bears the traces of, but is not limited to, its tragic historical context. The point is that the substantive form inherent to a particular sociality will warrant the vitality of its political organization in a manner that will be incomparably more effective than the application of "an arbitrary force" synonymous with the imposition of an empty, external form indifferent to its contents. Thus, the form of *complexio oppositorum* will encompass, among other things, the opposition between content and form, which will imbue it with substantiveness and liveliness.

In light of the problematic of the living form, a number of questions arise that are crucial to our understanding of Schmitt's concept of the political: What is life and how to conceive of its opposite? What is the meaning of coming to life, or being "enlivened"? How does the process of "deadening" occur in the sphere of the political? Most recently, Samuel Weber's *Targets of Opportunity* has resonated with these questions, and the answers are worth summarizing here. His most poignant suggestion is that what

19. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

appears to be the opposite of life—a “death-bearing enemy”—is, indeed, its condition of possibility, the guarantor of the tense vitality proper to the (at least) bipolar political world of friends and enemies.²¹ At the same time, however, he chides Schmitt for falling back on a traditional opposition of “man versus machine, which he also associates with the opposition of life versus death.”²² For Weber, then, Schmitt’s approach to the question of life is simultaneously nuanced and crude, veritably exemplifying his subject matter, *complexio oppositorum*.

Even though these observations are helpful, they leave undisturbed the meaning of life in Schmitt’s (early) writings, where to enliven is, in a certain sense, to formalize, to draw out the form that was already implicit in the “messy” and inexact content, all the while minimizing opportunities for the betrayal of their “messiness” and inexactitude. Yet, the pulsion of drawing *out* is, by the same token, tantamount to drawing these contents *into* the embrace of *complexio oppositorum*. The mechanism that, at once, does the work of externalization and internalization is concrete representation and, in particular, its rhetorical manifestations: “On the contrary, the power of speech and discourse—rhetoric in its greatest sense—is a criterion of human life. . . . It moves in antitheses. But these are not contradictions; they are the various and sundry elements molded into a *complexio* and thus give life to discourse.”²³ Here, Schmitt is not praising the deliberative empty talk of an infinite parliamentary discussion, which he denounces in *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, but what Heidegger might refer to as the deeply buried power of “primal words.” Their formal potency lies in the antithetical movement that circulates in the complex of determinate oppositions, from which the life of discourse derives. Concrete representation remains faithful to the polemical ground of discourse and to life itself.

On the other hand, de-formalization deadens; it amounts to a depoliticization, deformation, and neutralization of all determinate oppositions.

21. Weber, *Targets of Opportunity*, p. 40. The reliance of the category of life on a “death-bearing enemy” stands in contradiction to Weber’s assertion that the “model of the *creation of life out of nothing* will assume a subtle but decisive importance” in Schmitt (p. 35). To account for this contradiction, it would be necessary to examine the particular perspective from which life is created *ex nihilo*, the perspective that does not recognize the exception, that synthesizes opposites, and that depends on the principles of abstract representation.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

23. Schmitt, *Roman Catholicism*, p. 23.

As always in Schmitt, de-formalization that effectuates the disbanding of the *complex* of opposition portends a double danger: a reversion into the absolute difference of atomized, formless content that cannot be mustered into an oppositional arrangement *and* a conversion of a living form into the absolute indifference of a purely abstract form or concept, such as "humanity."²⁴ Where "[u]niversality at any price would necessarily have to mean total depoliticization,"²⁵ particularity at any cost produces the same effect because it dissolves political oppositions into mere difference.²⁶ Death, therefore, also arrives in two ways: (1) the *rigor mortis* of abstract contradiction, hyper-formalism, and hyper-determination; and (2) decomposition into pure difference and complete indeterminacy.

It follows that Schmitt's conception of life is non-vitalist and non-organicist. Life is not an impersonal force of sheer immanence that sweeps all organic entities into its midst. That which is most living in it is *complexio oppositorum*, which is to say that the most fateful, the most potent standoff transpires between life and death *within the living life itself*.²⁷ Any living form worthy of the name holds in itself this constitutive finitude, regardless of the occasional Schmittian rhetoric against mechanization and its external relation to death, aired by Samuel Weber. It is enough to take a glance at "The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations," an influential essay written in 1929 and appended to *The Concept of the Political* in 1932, to realize that what Schmitt calls "the pluralism of spiritual life [*Pluralismus des geistigen Lebens*]" is nothing other than the secularized *complexio* capable of accommodating both life and death: "it is wrong to

24. John McCormick, in "Transcending Weber's Categories of Modernity? The Early Lukács and Schmitt on the Rationalization Thesis," *New German Critique* 75 (Autumn 1998): 133–77, exhibits high theoretical sensitivity when he describes the formality of Schmitt's Roman Catholicism with a double negative: "Roman Catholicism is a form *not* indifferent to content, nor is it an irrational elevation of content to an exalted level" (p. 163). This non-indifference and non-elevation are the hallmarks of the form that is living.

25. Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, p. 55.

26. According to Derrida's reading of Schmitt, the discrimination between a friend and an enemy "cannot be reduced to mere difference. It is a determined opposition, opposition itself." See Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London: Verso, 1997), p. 85.

27. Thus, the ending of "The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations," in which Schmitt writes, "life struggles not with death, spirit not with spiritlessness . . . ; spirit struggles with spirit, life with life" (*The Concept of the Political*, p. 96), could be interpreted as a rejection of the formally empty view that opposes pure life to pure death in favor of the approach that situates the life-death opposition within the "struggling lives" themselves.

solve a political problem with the antithesis of organic and mechanistic, life and death. A life which has only death as its antithesis [*Ein Leben, das gegenüber sich selbst nichts mehr hat als den Tod*] is no longer life but powerlessness and helplessness.”²⁸ Life does not face death and mechanization as external possibilities but, in the capacity of a living form, harbors its opposites within itself.²⁹ The political quest for such a form cannot disregard the mechanistic and the inorganic, much less exclude them from the “pluralism” defined by the welcome that it extends to all determinate oppositions.

We might project these existential theses back onto Schmitt’s refusal to romanticize Roman Catholicism by allying it with the “soulful polarity” of the fictitious “dichotomy between a rationalistic-mechanistic world of human labor and a romantic-virginal state of nature.”³⁰ However monstrous or deadening it might be, the “rationalistic-mechanistic world,” taken to be a metonymy for modern culture, is an offshoot of life, perhaps, one that defines life’s very liveliness. Likewise, the striving toward the paradisiacal “state of nature” is a product of the same culture that it desires to evade. Taking this dual insight into account will allow us to rethink “culture,” which, throughout the history of Western philosophy, has been equated with death, and to reconsider its contemporary avatar, “multiculturalism,” in terms of a mutation of *complexio oppositorum*.

A Virtuous Circle: The Mutual Invigoration of Culture and Politics

In keeping with the stages of neutralization where the political intensity ebbs away from the institutions it previously sustained, the emptiness of

28. Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, p. 95. A few pages earlier, Schmitt has written: “A result of human understanding and specialized knowledge, such as a discipline and in particular modern technology, also cannot be presented as dead and soulless any more than can the religion of technicity be confused with technology itself” (pp. 93–94). His point, then, is that culture and technology (the contemporary incarnation of the latter) do not stand on the side of pure death.

29. Jacques Derrida, in *The Postcard: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1987), has eloquently called this irreconcilable, non-dialectizable tension “*la vie la mort*” or “*life death*” (p. 259).

30. Schmitt, *Roman Catholicism*, p. 10. “The Church is neither the mechanically formalistic entity scorned by Protestants nor the haven of unconquered nature and irrational expression lauded by Romantics” (McCormick, “Transcending Weber’s Categories,” p. 163). Yet, to say, as McCormick does in the following sentence, that the Church “stands above such antinomies, absorbs, maintains, and transcends them” is to equate the operations of the *complexio* with the Hegelian *Aufhebung*.

abstract form is a historical by-product of every depoliticized domain, be it theology, metaphysics, or the state. But the cumulative effects of this hollowing out ultimately threaten culture itself: "Once everything had been abstracted from religion and technology, then from metaphysics and the state, everything appeared to have been abstracted above all from culture, ending in the neutrality of cultural death [*die Neutralität des kulturellen Todes*]." ³¹ For Schmitt, absolute neutrality is tantamount to nihilism, or to what, on the next page of the 1929 essay, he calls "the fear of cultural and social nothingness [*die Furcht vor dem kulturellen und sozialen Nichts*]." ³² It appears, then, that an effective response to this fear does not consist in the individual recuperation of formerly politicized domains, but in enlivening the cultural form that has been gradually eroded at every successive stage of depoliticization. In other words, the goal is to politicize culture *in toto* by allowing cultural life, in the sense of the antagonistic *complexio oppositorum*, to flourish in the place claimed by the neutrality of death.

Two obstacles that arise before any attempt to rehabilitate this form are Schmitt's ostensibly dismissive attitude to culture in *The Concept of the Political* and the traditional association between culture and death deeply ingrained in the history of Western thought. First, in imagining the complete disappearance or leveling of enemy-friend distinctions, "[w]hat remains is neither politics nor state, but culture, civilization, economics, morality, law, art, entertainment, etc." ³³ The open-ended list of remainders is by no means haphazard or accidental, since the depoliticized culture translates seamlessly into a kind of civilization where the false dilemma of choosing between economic rationality and a legally codified morality is the only "serious" supplement to the danger-free and light (but, ultimately, boring and bored) human existence in a perpetual search for new sources of entertainment. At the extreme, culture *is* entertainment, which is to say, something hopelessly inadequate to the task of breathing new life into the political.

Nonetheless, as Leo Strauss's astute analysis makes clear, Schmitt paints an image of the impoverished culture that, as such, does "not *have* to be entertainment, but . . . *can* become entertainment." ³⁴ The uncomplicated depiction of cultural bankruptcy is not a definitional necessity,

31. Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, p. 93.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 94.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

34. Leo Strauss, "Notes on Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*," in Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, p. 116.

but only a possibility that hinges upon its empty formalization throughout the recent stages of neutralization. Entertainment gains an upper hand when the “pluralism of spiritual life” is greatly reduced to a one-dimensional monoculture disseminated on the mass scale. The position Strauss champions is probably predicated on an elitist valorization of high over low culture that relegates all seriousness to the former and an empty, “nauseating” curiosity to the latter. Despite this predication, the institution in question is not necessarily diversionary and non-political—a reality to which the very standoff between its high and low varieties testifies. Thus, in and of itself, culture is not allergic to politics.

The second problem staring us in the face is that, up to the present, philosophy has insistently identified culture with death.³⁵ Already for Hegel, culture as “self-alienated spirit” is instituted thanks to “the true sacrifice of *being-for-self* . . . that . . . surrenders itself as completely as in death.”³⁶ Transpiring in the medium of language, the self-sacrifice of consciousness results from a desire to make sense for the other, the desire whose fulfillment indicates that my “*real existence dies away*.”³⁷ More recently and more explicitly, Jacques Derrida has maintained that “[t]here is no culture without a cult of ancestors, a ritualization of mourning and sacrifice. . . . The very concept of culture may seem to be synonymous with the culture of death, as if the expression ‘culture of death’ were ultimately a pleonasm or a tautology.”³⁸ The stakes of the identification of culture with death are high; if, as Derrida proposes, the two terms are synonymous, then culture connotes pacification and dissolution of all contradictions—in a word, depoliticization.

Nonetheless, upon closer scrutiny this conclusion proves to be unwarranted. In Hegel as well as in Derrida, death is not a finality abstractly opposed to life, but a part of the concrete, living life itself. The “culture of death” that ritualizes mourning cares for the double survival (the excess

35. A notable exception to this general rule is Nietzsche, who foreshadows Schmitt in his emphasis on a living unity of content and form in any given culture: “a people to whom one attributes culture has to be in all reality a single living unity and not fall wretchedly apart into inner and outer, content and form.” Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997), p. 80.

36. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977), p. 308.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 309.

38. Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1993), p. 43.

of life over and above itself) of those whose memory is institutionally monumentalized and of those who cultivate this very memory. Neither is the dying away of "real existence" in language the last word of the subject who acquires a new life in the discursively mediated intersubjective relation. Cultural life is, thus, transformed by its intimate relation to death and is lived on a different plane than mere biological existence.

More pertinently, commenting on Schmitt's work, Strauss experiments with a more decisive break with the philosophical equation of culture and death: "'culture' always presupposes something that is cultivated: culture is always the *culture of nature*. This expression means, primarily, that culture develops the natural predisposition . . . ; it thus *obeys* the orders that nature itself gives."³⁹ In Strauss's rendition, culture is the instantiation of a living form that is not imposed on its contents but grows out of them, "*obeys the orders*" of what it cultivates. The uncanny resemblance between this definition of culture and the way of communal life that, according to Schmitt, plays a key role in the upsurge of statehood hinges on the fact that both are salient examples of the living, substantial formation of *complexio oppositorum*. Just as the state determines the oppositions that are already present in any given mode of living together, so culture shapes the materials of nature entrusted for its cultivation. In the last instance, the cultivation of the human and non-human, organic and inorganic nature is the arche-political act that determines the internal form of oppositions and sets them in motion as a living formation (*Lebensgestaltung*). Conversely, the creation of cults may be conducive to the ossification of a static cultural form (*Form*), sanctioning an arbitrary imposition of abstractions that are foreign to the content, to which they attach themselves.

Culture, therefore, becomes animated by virtue of its participation in the logic of living forms that sketches out the outlines of *complexio oppositorum*. Differently put, in its substantive manifestations, it is always already politically charged. But Schmitt is, above all, a thinker of the crisis of the political that adversely affects or rarefies the substantive dimension. A form of forms victimized to the greatest extent in the age of neutralizations and depleted to the point of merging with entertainment, culture holds the highest potential among the other "shipwrecks" of depoliticization

39. Strauss, "Notes on Carl Schmitt," p. 104. Admittedly, this language may be excessively organicist, but it is in sync with the Schmitt of *Roman Catholicism*, who categorically states that the attitudes of mastery and domination are alien to the Catholic conceptions of nature. See Schmitt, *Roman Catholicism*, pp. 9ff.

(economics, morality, technicity, etc.) to resist this dominant trend and to give a new impetus to the political. How can this double bind be resolved concretely? I turn to multiculturalism for an answer.

Multiculturalism: A New Complexio Oppositorum?

At first glance, multiculturalism embodies everything Schmitt has found to be reprehensible about liberalism. It coincides with an ideal type of administrative politics that pretends to abandon enemy-friend distinctions in favor of a much more indeterminate “cultural difference” as long as it poses no real threat to the regime. Historically, however, the reasons behind adopting multiculturalism as an official policy have been political in the distinctly Schmittian sense. For example, in Canada, the precursor of the 1988 Multiculturalism Act was promulgated by Pierre Trudeau’s government in 1971, with the tacit strategic aims not only of luring the votes of the increasing “New Canadian” immigrant population, but also of thwarting the aspirations of Quebec nationalists, whose assertion of the province’s unique status was diluted with reference to the cultural specificity of other ethnic communities.⁴⁰ As a result of the “Policy of Multiculturalism within the Bilingual Framework,” the separatist movement was indirectly designated as the abstract enemy of “cultural diversity,” masking its status as the concrete adversary of the federal state.

I cite the Canadian example in order to illustrate the political possibilities of multiculturalism that surpass its stated objectives as avowed by a liberal polity. Although a Schmittian reading of this historical instance is plausible, it will be necessary to elaborate a more general way of politicizing the term that has become something of a catchword in the contemporary politically-correct discourse. Asking a patently philosophical question, “What is multiculturalism?” will lead us to a realization that it is the truth of culture knowing itself as such, that is, as a plurality. Let me unpack this polemical definition with an eye to Schmitt’s work.

In 1929, he writes: “All concepts in the spiritual sphere, including the concept of spirit, are pluralistic in themselves [*sind in sich pluralistisch*] and can only be understood in terms of concrete political existence. Just as every nation has its own concept of nation and finds the constitutive

40. Cf. Enoch Padolsky, “Multiculturalism at the Millennium,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 35, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 138–61; Danielle Juteau, “The Sociology of Ethno-National Relations in Quebec,” in *Deconstructing a Nation: Immigration, Multiculturalism and Racism in ‘90s Canada*, ed. V. Satzewich (Halifax: Fernwood, 1992), pp. 323–42.

characteristics of nationality within itself, so every culture and cultural epoch has its own concept of culture."⁴¹ Like "all concepts in the spiritual sphere," culture is not a totalizing synthesis of diverse, often antithetical, moments. The unstated negative reference to Hegel in this passage is rather blatant, given that his philosophy of history, precisely, hypostatizes a particular culture raised to the dignity of the concept and, therefore, to the status of a yardstick for its counterparts. Schmitt's radical historicism, on the contrary, operates with the non-synthesizable pluralism, which inheres in every "spiritual concept" and generates its form based on the particular historical content of "concrete political existence." Therefore, to affirm that multiculturalism is the truth of culture is not to make a transcendental metaphysical assumption. Quite the opposite is the case: this affirmation implies that no one culture can legitimately posit itself as the golden standard of Culture, since it must negotiate its living form with the internal resources and constitutive characteristics at its disposal. In the epoch of multiculturalism, the plurality of "culture" comes into its own.

Nevertheless, one should neither overlook nor dismiss the institution's popular and trivializing underside. Commenting on the Janus-faced structure of multiculturalism, Gayatri Spivak draws from it a lesson for postcolonial strategy: "If the multiculturalists' many cultures cannot be captured by some notebook definition, nor can Rorty's Enlightenment culture. . . . Our task is to look at the two strategies: culture as a battle cry against one culture's claim to Reason as such, by insider as well as outsider; and culture as a nice name for the exoticism of the outsiders."⁴² This succinct formulation is political in the best of Schmittian traditions. Spivak acknowledges the existence of two cultural modalities, one of which retains a certain substantive and political richness of the "battle cry," while the other, presumably depoliticized in the capacity of "a nice name for the exoticism of the outsiders" and trimmed down to entertainment, pursues politics by other means. Furthermore, she echoes Schmitt's criticism of a totalized concept of culture ("captured by some notebook definition") put forth in the name of Reason. But it is at this point, which seems to reach the apogee of the political, that Spivak both continues and ceases to follow Schmitt. To be sure, she overtly identifies the enemy—"one culture's claim to Reason as such," in other words, an institution that presents itself as the

41. Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, p. 85.

42. Gayatri C. Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1990), p. 355.

dispassionate arbiter of all conflicts—in a gesture that remains indispensable to any political practice. Yet, the enemy is not an external foe or an internal adversary, but a unilateral (in this case, Eurocentric) usurpation of the cosmopolitan idea,⁴³ against which insiders fight shoulder-to-shoulder with outsiders. The enemy is not an abstraction, but those who promulgate an abstract, albeit contextually specific, cultural form in the guise of a de-contextualized universal.

The alliance of insiders and outsiders is indebted to the multicultural predicament, where the living forms of various cultures must be co-negotiated, considering that they necessarily coexist within the same political space. While such co-negotiation should not be linked, in a rushed manner, to the emergence of a consensus, cultural coexistence means incalculably more than “ensuring every citizen the opportunity to grow up within the world of a cultural heritage . . . without suffering discrimination because of it.”⁴⁴ What liberal minimalism fails to recognize in its discussions of the “politics” of recognition is that the only path toward rendering multiculturalism politically relevant passes through the recoding of the cultural sphere into a playground for antagonism. In this recoding, the figure of the enemy needs to be sharply outlined, and I hurry to reassure the liberal skeptics that the outlines of this figure will not capture a particular demonized cultural sub-group.⁴⁵ Rather, the enemies are those who practice a blown-up and standardized projection of particularity that, under the cover of Reason, endeavors to impress itself if not on the other cultural particulars, then on the ground upon which antagonisms surface and get resolved. To confront such cunning “tolerance,” which masks an intransigent totalitarianism, it

43. In response to the counterargument that European thought could not have usurped the cosmopolitan idea since it enunciated this idea in the first place, I would say that this enunciation itself (which marked the subsequent history of the concept) was deployed in the context of colonial usurpation and exploitation that furnished the background for the first cultural encounters.

44. Jürgen Habermas, “Struggles for Recognition in the Democratic Constitutional State,” in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1994), pp. 131–32.

45. The first practical obstacle standing before such recoding is that, outside of the quasi-Schmittian discourse of the current administration in the United States, it is politically incorrect to pinpoint the enemy. A further complication is that this pinpointing must be performed on the neutralized ground of “tolerant” liberalism that is covertly totalitarian. As a consequence, the current attempt will be brought to fruition only when the general political climate becomes more avowedly political, in the Schmittian sense, and therefore less allergic to non-reactionary identifications of the enemy.

will not be enough to debunk the myth of the neutrality of abstract rationality used by its practitioners stealthily to pursue their political objectives. The antagonism it fuels will obstinately persist because, to invert Bacon, it is one of the most durable "idols of the cave" that cannot be decisively smashed once and for all.

The features of *complexio oppositorum* come through in this portrayal of multiculturalism, as though in a photographic negative.⁴⁶ Unlike its liberal counterpart, which cleverly passes totalitarian rigidity for the tolerance of "otherness" and "diversity," the proposed Schmittian multiculturalism does not pre-delineate the terrain for political engagements, nor does it project culturally specific attitudes and beliefs onto the contrived sphere of universality. Akin to the complex, it embraces the sometimes contradictory cultural particularities in a non-totalizable fashion, keeps open the space for political antagonism, functions as a radically pluralistic living form, and non-transcendentally expresses the truth of culture. As a result, the correlation between the *complexio* and a revised multiculturalism allows the two terms to join in the long list of theological concepts and their secularized political incarnations.

Of course, it could be objected that the ascription of these revolutionary features to an institution so steeped in the rhetoric of depoliticization and neutralization is an outcome of wishful thinking that bears little resemblance to its liberal instantiation and risks deteriorating into the very totalitarianism it criticizes. I offer two retorts to this objection. First, even if the above description refers to a hopelessly untenable utopian ideal, the sheer contestation of the predominant version of multiculturalism already contains some of the characteristics of this very utopia. In proposing an oppositional multicultural strategy, as Spivak does, one challenges its ossified institutionalized form and provokes an enduring standoff irresolvable on the old procedural grounds. In other words, regardless of its empirical existence or nonexistence, a rigorously theorized multiculturalism informed by Schmittian political concepts re-politicizes a stale keyword of liberal discourse by identifying the figure of the enemy in its midst. It

46. In *Roman Catholicism and the Political Form*, the secular paradigm of the *complexio* is jurisprudence: "In the social world, secular jurisprudence also manifests a certain *complexio* of competing interests and tendencies" (p. 29). Thus, a more detailed extension of the argument on multiculturalism could benefit from thinking the conjunction between it and the juridical domain, for instance, in the constituting documents of the doctrine, such as the Canadian Multiculturalism Act and its predecessors.

roughly accomplishes what Schmitt himself has achieved with the notion of *complexio oppositorum*, which he polemically inherited from an anti-Catholic thinker for the purpose of positively describing the innermost essence of Roman Catholicism.

My second retort is not unrelated to the first. We should unlearn the chief ideological lesson of liberalism that presents totalitarianism as the sole alternative to its own “tolerant” and “representative” approach. Neither the re-politicization of multiculturalism nor the complex of opposites that governs it is compatible with totalitarian politics. According to Schmitt, the demand for a total state “which potentially embraces every domain” arises in response to the great neutralizations and depoliticizations of the nineteenth century.⁴⁷ Although the same verb—“embraces [*ergreifende*]”—crops up here to describe the activity of the total state as that of *complexio oppositorum*, the gap between the two is unbridgeable. Whereas, presuming an erroneous equation of state and politics, the former intensifies the process it reacts against,⁴⁸ the latter wrests intense oppositions from neutralized domains and dispenses them to the realm of the political. This is to say that the reinvigorated conception of multiculturalism launches a critique against its liberal double from a perspective far removed from totalitarianism, which will never espouse a *living* form.

Conclusion: On Dining in Schmitt’s “Cosmopolitan Restaurant”

On the threshold of spelling out the meaning of *complexio oppositorum*, Schmitt relates the frustrations of Catholic nationalists, notably the Irish, with the belittlement of their national particularity in the context of Roman universality. In a highly ironic prose, he writes: “An Irishman, reflecting the embitterment of his Gaelic national consciousness, opined that Ireland was ‘just a pinch of snuff in the Roman snuffbox’ (he would have rather said: A chicken the prelate would drop into the caldron which he was boiling for the cosmopolitan restaurant).”⁴⁹ At the same time, Schmitt warns his readers that “[d]espite the allusion to the peculiarities of universalism, the political idea of Catholicism has as yet not been defined.”⁵⁰ The warning implies that, insofar as the yet undefined idea hinges on the notion of *complexio oppositorum* (which will give it a certain substance

47. Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, p. 22.

48. Ibid.

49. Schmitt, *Roman Catholicism*, p. 6.

50. Ibid.

and definition), the Irishman's apprehensions are unfounded. The *complexio* leaves enough breathing space for particularity not to be subsumed in the non-striated indifference of the universal. Therefore, in the cosmopolitan restaurant of Roman Catholicism, "Gaelic national consciousness" will not be devoured as readily as the chicken the prelate has prepared.

And yet, isn't the cosmopolitan restaurant an apt metaphorization of multiculturalism? Doesn't it cater to all tastes, save for the predilections of those who prefer the spiciness it is unable to supply—the spiciness of the political—and of those who end up as the main dishes it serves? Don't the "outsider" cultures benefiting from liberal recognition simply render the menu more exotic? We would have to answer these questions in the affirmative, with the proviso that the political idea of multiculturalism has as yet not been defined. The image of the cosmopolitan restaurant describes a compound whose constituent parts have been depoliticized in light of an arcane political strategy that reduces all culture to mere entertainment. Conversely, the other multiculturalism founded on the tenets of *complexio oppositorum* would retain the element of the indigestible not just for the "customers" but also for its mainstream political counterpart. This indigestibility refers to the antagonisms implicit, simultaneously, in any cultural life, in the co-negotiation of the living forms proper to various cultures, as well as in the enunciation of the enemy—a forcibly universalized particular rationality—that culminates in mainstream multiculturalism. Guided by the logic of the exception, which is not inconsistent with the tense framework of the living form, the *complexio* nourishes these antagonisms in the contemporary incarnation of the "truth" of culture.