

**THE ELEMENTAL REGIMES OF CARL SCHMITT,  
OR THE ABC OF PYROPOLITICS**

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**The Idea of Elemental Politics**

The period that roughly coincided with and immediately followed the Second World War saw Carl Schmitt devoting much intellectual energy to investigations into what we might call “politics of the elemental.” In *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes* (1938), *Land and Sea* (1942), and *The Nomos of the Earth* (1950), to mention but a few prominent texts, he conceptualized global political regimes in terms of epic struggles between the primordial elements of earth and water<sup>1</sup>. In the course of these investigations, Schmitt concluded that while all political communities and activities had initially revolved around the image of the earth—first, disjointed and fragmentary; later on, consolidated into a coherent worldview—the next stage of mythic history hinged—in England, Spain, Portugal, and a few other countries—upon the collective orientation toward the sea, a much more unstable element, where borders and divisions lost their definitive character and gave rise to increased uncertainty, as well as to an escalating strife,

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1. For an overview of the elemental mythology of *nomos* in Schmitt, cf. Dean, “*Nomos*: Word and Myth,” 242-58.

indicative of the fact that a new political intensity had been reached. In each case, the political was associated with (indeed, housed in) a particular elemental sphere, replete with an appropriate mythical symbolism, often presented in the shape of large animals, not to mention distinct goals and military strategies, ways of organizing space and defining the human place in it, waging war and maintaining peace. The world viewed from the standpoint of dry land was not the same world as the one experienced from the perspective of the high seas; the defense of sovereign territories was different from the tactical-military supremacy over *mare liberum*; the constitution of the Leviathan was divergent from that of the Behemoth...

If this admittedly simplified approach to geopolitics and maritime politics, of which Schmitt himself was occasionally critical<sup>2</sup>, is reminiscent of ancient Greek, pre-Socratic—if not pre-philosophical—thought, this is not a haphazard association<sup>3</sup>. The first cosmologies in Greece, in Mesopotamia, where they are believed to have originated<sup>4</sup>, in India, and in the Buddhist Pali literature postulated, in various forms, the classical elements that, at minimum, included earth, water, air or wind, and fire. The Greeks and the Romans tended to interpret relations between the elements as those of strife, elevating contention—the

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2. “[Goethe’s verses “All pretty things have trickled away, / Only sea and land count here]” steer attention too much away from international law, and to either a geographical-scientific or an elemental-mythological approach. That would not do justice to the essentially jurisprudential foundations of this book, which I have taken so much pains to construct.” (Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth*, 37).

3. Schmitt points out this connection in *Land and Sea*, 3ff. Likewise, in the Forward to *The Nomos of The Earth*, he acknowledges the influence of Johann Jacob Bachofen, whose texts introduced him to the mythical sources of jurisprudence (38). In his own investigations of ancient mythologies, Bachofen came to the conclusion that the earth was the spring of all human artifacts, including the earliest versions of jurisprudence (*Der Mythos von Orient und Occident*, 183). Instead of the dialectics of myth and enlightenment, depicted by Adorno and Horkheimer, we are thus dealing with the dialectics of myth and jurisprudence.

4. For the Babylonian creation myth *Enûma Eliš*, detailing the relation between the elements, see *Myths from Mesopotamia* (2008).

political affect *par excellence*—to the status of an ontological, cosmic principle. Heraclitus and Lucretius are the paradigmatic thinkers of originary discord, “the father of all and king of all,” according to the pre-Socratic’s famous Fragment 83, and “this war that has been waged since time everlasting, the contest between the elements,” in the words of the Roman philosopher<sup>5</sup>. Just as the external world is the embodiment not of harmony but of an intense conflict, where ontological differences are fought out and, in the course of this ongoing cosmic battle, give rise to determinate, differentiated entities, so too human reality, the mirror and the microcosm of the universe, is full of enmity. Power, governance, and sovereignty are the continuation of cosmology and cosmogony by other means, even if the relations between the elements that make up the world are themselves conceived on the basis of essentially human categories (e.g., kingship and war).

The mythology of the elements forms the clandestine prehistory of political theology, a term Schmitt reserved exclusively for the Judeo-Christian foundations of the political imaginary. It stands at the crossroads of myth and metaphysics and, consequently, at the pre-conceptual threshold of philosophy. Even so, the elemental prolegomena to thought are largely foreclosed to metaphysical grasp and may be finally retrieved only once the history of metaphysics has come to an end, as Heidegger often claimed.<sup>6</sup> Schmitt’s political philosophy, too, may be classified (if classify it we must) as post-metaphysical—an argument I advanced in *Groundless Existence*—and this could well be one of the reasons why the anachronistic return to the classical elements we witness in the German thinker’s work is much more than a mere relic of the anti-Enlightenment approach to politics. Still, regardless of this rapprochement, we should already note a crucial difference between the pre- and post-metaphysical paradigms: whereas, for the ancients, ontology is inherently and eminently political insofar as it is marked by the ongoing struggle between the warring elements often personified as divinities, Schmitt valorizes the other side of the coin, that is, the

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5. *On the Nature of Things*, 49.

6. Cf. Heidegger and Fink, *The Heraclitus Seminar*, 75ff.

ontological nature of politics. If, however, Schmittian ontology is existential-phenomenological in its attunement to the subjective experience of and to the conditions of possibility for the political<sup>7</sup>, then a veritable gulf seems to have opened between the paradigms framing the history of metaphysics at either extreme. Therefore, the initial question we are faced with is: Does the politics of the elemental, with its emphasis on the substantial and objective dimensions of the world, not contravene a subject-oriented approach to politics spearheaded by Schmitt?

Taking care not to project subsequent developments in the history of metaphysics onto the pre-metaphysical ways of thinking, one should be reluctant to describe the elements as the “substantial” and “objective” immutable givens, considering that these descriptors are themselves historically associated with modern philosophy. It should be also recalled that neither existentialism nor phenomenology advances an idealist version of the subject who would be detached from the materiality and lived actuality of the world and who would encounter these markers of a messy reality only in an *après coup*, after her “fall” into the world. The notions of the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*) and the environing world (*Umwelt*), for example, are indispensable for phenomenological analyses that invariably demonstrate how existents are entirely embedded in their worlds. The same basic insight applies to all those who inhabit a political lifeworld, which is irreducible to merely imagined communities. The materiality of political practices entails their situatedness in a particular milieu—provided that the elements are understood in their environmental sense<sup>8</sup>—even though the environmental context of politics is far from being limited to the solidity of the earth.

The rapidly changing character of the political *Umwelt* comes to the fore in the retrieval of the pre-metaphysical elements at the dusk of the history of metaphysics, but such that the environing world of political subjects becomes less and less auspicious for human dwelling and

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7. Marder, *Groundless Existence*, *passim*.

8. For this approach to the elements, consult Macauley’s *Elemental Philosophy* (2010).

habitation. When in modernity “all that is solid melts into air,” as Marx and Engels wrote in *The Communist Manifesto*, the earth itself finally succumbs to the dominance of the ethereal element that spirits away all firm supports from thought and action. What passes for the dematerialization of the modern world is nothing but a shift, carrying drastic political consequences, in the arenas where this world unfolds. Our situation today is that of *neither land nor sea*; updated for the twenty-first century, the central political elements are the dyad of air and fire.

### The Changing Order and Disorder of the Earth

It would be all too easy to explain Schmitt’s own recourse to mytho-poetic language with reference to the reactionary anti-modernism that stamps many of his political writings, or to dismiss it as a collection of fairytales unsubstantiated by serious scholarship. But, after all, isn’t the self-consciousness of myth as myth the badge of honor that rightfully belongs to genuine enlightenment? Aren’t analyses of political mythologies and theologies much more productive and intellectually honest than the rationalist fictions of contractarianism, busy with deluding and congratulating themselves on the complete overcoming of myth? Be this as it may, perhaps something other than anti-modernism is at stake in the articulation, prevalent in Schmitt’s writings of the “middle period,” of political subjectivity and its elemental background. Perhaps this articulation is a variation on the theme of the Hegelian subject-object synthesis, which Schmitt prefers to code as the unity of order and orientation, *Ordnung und Ortung*, that jointly amount to the totality of *nomos*<sup>9</sup>. The scope of this hypothesis is admittedly limited, in that the unity of order and orientation presupposes a particular element, namely the earth, to which a human being, “a terrestrial being, a groundling [*ein Landwesen, ein Landtreter*]” who “stands, moves and walks on the firmly-grounded Earth [*feste-gründeten Erde*]” and uses it as “his standpoint [*Standpunkt*] and his base

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9. “The terrestrial fundament, in which all law is rooted, in which space and law, order and orientation meet, was recognized by the great legal philosophers.” (Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth*, 47).

[*Boden*],”<sup>10</sup> belongs. *Nomos* is always and necessarily *of the earth*; it concerns the unity of order and orientation within that element to which humans belong and which they seize, appropriate, and claim to themselves as their property, their most basic belonging, *dominium*. But, in contrast to the determination of the law by the earth, not all politics is a geopolitics: the *imperium* of the remaining elements is quite free of territorial *dominium*. When political activity departs from the firm abode of the earth, it either gets extinguished in ungrounded abstractions and systems of legality, or, conversely, it gets absolutely de-territorialized—not in the manner of Deleuze and Guattari’s nomads who still roam the surface of the earth, but in the manner of those who have lost the very possibility of abiding, dwelling, or inhabiting. Without a firm attachment to the earth, the unity of order and orientation falls apart and each of its two components internally disintegrates, since order without orientation is empty and orientation without order is blind. Even the elementary possibility of drawing the lines of law, Right, and legality is denied to those who no longer operate within the confines of earth-bound politics, instead entrusting themselves to the much more subtle (and at the same time much more intense) differentiations typical of the other elements.

What matters, above all, is not that empires and hegemonic regional blocks encompassing enormous landmasses rise and fall but, rather, that geopolitics as an idea and as the elemental framing of practical politics is on a steady decline. This is why Schmitt states so pessimistically in *Glossarium*, “This is the new *nomos* of the earth—no more *nomos* [*Das ist der neue Nomos der Erde; kein Nomos mehr*].”<sup>11</sup> The new *nomos* of the earth loses the outlines of *nomos* because it has been doubly decoupled from the earth, while the political sphere has been rid of the solidity of substance, as much as of its “sphericity,” the quintessentially geopolitical and geometrical figure. From the standpoint of the politics of the earth, to which Schmitt remains sympathetic to say

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10. Schmitt, *Land and Sea*, 1. In this and all the subsequent quotations of this book, the English translation has been modified.

11. Schmitt, *Glossarium*, 179.

the least, the new *nomos* is a-nomic, if not anarchic, a harbinger of chaos unrestrained by sovereign authority, the *Katechon*. Yet, positively understood, political activity transposed onto the other elements is released from the dead weight of substance and given over to a wealth of existential determinations. In this same light, what is normally deemed to be the de-materialization of political practices is a part of this dramatic ground-shift, of the human loss of grounding, firm foundations, footing, and standpoint on *terra firma*<sup>12</sup>. As Schmitt recognized in his theory of maritime politics, the sea is much more unstable than the earth and, it should be added, marine uncertainty only intensifies when other elements surge to the foreground of political action. The *nomos* of the earth is generally instituted when dividing lines are redrawn on the local or global scale, but the *nomos* of the sea, much less of air or of fire, is inconceivable, despite all the international maritime treaties and regulations, because “[o]n the sea, fields cannot be planted and firm lines cannot be engraved.”<sup>13</sup> The differentiations that result from tracing, or, even archi-tracing, which is the non-transcendental condition of possibility for differentiation in Derrida<sup>14</sup>, cease to make any sense without the fundamental substratum of the earth capable of supporting all divisions and spatial differences.

The lawlessness of the non-terrestrial elements does not prevent these elements from acquiring an acutely political character. Indeed, the political regimes of the sea, of air, and of fire institute new non-linear divisions, and, thereby, dramatically remold human ontology. While it is true that “man is neither fish nor bird, and certainly not a being of fire [*Feuerwesen*]—were one to exist,”<sup>15</sup> he is, nevertheless, thrust into these “non-human” elements by his own political activity. Our *Umwelt* is, consequently, de-familiarized and rendered uninhabitable.

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12. I have explored the ethical consequences of the loss of ground in “The Ethical Ungrounding of Phenomenology.”

13. Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth*, 42.

14. For instance, in *Of Grammatology* (1967).

15. Schmitt, *Land and Sea*, 2.

Everything in it, including ourselves, turns unrecognizable, uncanny, foreign. Human beings no longer know whether or not they are “beings of fire;” at the extreme of the elemental transformation of the world and of the human, a suicide bomber endeavors to turn herself into such a being and, literally, to set the world around her on fire. That the classical “rules of engagement” have become irrelevant is a part of a broader sweeping tendency toward a politics less preoccupied with territorial defenses, especially there where human beings have been dispossessed and displaced, as in the case of the Palestinian people. Although the political aspirations of the radically dispossessed may (and will) ultimately revert back to the earth and to territorial claims, the interim state is that of dis-order and dis-orientation derailing all the conventional stratagems of organized state violence. Despite their loyalty to the native soil, the “irregular” combat of partisans<sup>16</sup> throws into disarray the ground-rules of professional army operations. The “bearers of the elemental powers of the...earth”<sup>17</sup> spell out the end of strictly earth-oriented politics.

The condition of “irregular” fighters and their marine counterparts—the pirates—is, in fact, symptomatic of the global situation, where the non-terrestrial elements are on the ascendance and where “world order” increasingly presents itself as world disorder because the “world” exceeds the boundaries of *terra firma*, the earth. In Schmitt’s texts, the name of this excess is the sea, the element of water that lacks the inner measure, the sense of justice, and the *nomos*-generating unity of order and orientation typical of the earth. When it comes to the grand standoff of land and sea, Schmitt sides with the earthly element, pleading for “a new *nomos* of the earth” and suggesting that “[h]uman thinking again must be directed to the elemental orders of its terrestrial being here and now.”<sup>18</sup> The politics of the earth is the politics of pure immanence, of sheer immersion in the “here and now,”

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16. Schmitt, *Theory of the Partisan*, 14, 21.

17. Schmitt, *Theory of the Partisan*, 12.

18. Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth*, 38.

but so is the politics of the elemental *in toto*. Far from being absolute, the transcendence of each element is relative vis-à-vis all the others, even if it seems that everything detached from the earth loses touch with the materiality of existence. The rarification of the non-earthly elements does veer on the side of ideality and transcendence, but a careful observer will realize that it signals transcendence within immanence. Elemental politics engulfs the entirety of being, first and foremost the human being, in its concreteness and puts an end to empty proceduralism that falls under the heading “liberal democracy.” We will have an occasion to specify how such intense politicization transpires under the heading of “politics of fire,” or *pyropolitics*, that increasingly supplants the old geopolitical model.

Human attachment to the earth and the soil is understandable within the context of Schmitt’s Catholicism, which, much more than a religion, is definitive, according to the German thinker, of a way of being that is telluric, earth-bound, or *terrist*<sup>19</sup>. Somewhat more mysterious is the circumscription, by Schmitt, of the non-terrestrial elements to the high seas and a certain calculated forgetting of air and fire in his otherwise robust political mythology. While the political regimes of the earth and of the water (the sea) boast a familiar structure, the politics of air is as hard to imagine as the politics of fire. One reason for this difficulty is the belatedness of these elements’ ascendancy within the simplified chronological scheme Schmitt outlines on the final pages of *Land and Sea*. The “other” of the earth is thus metonymically identified with the high seas, and the political-existential boundary, the outermost limit of *nomos* itself—with the place “here...where the land ends and the sea begins,” *aqui...onde a terra se acaba e o mar começa*, in the legendary words of the Portuguese national poet Luís de Camões.

This is not to say that there are no indications, however fragmentary, on the subject of the politics of air and fire in Schmitt’s texts. In principle, if each of the four elements is an “indication of the great possibilities of human existence,”<sup>20</sup> then what are the “possibilities

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19. Schmitt, *Roman Catholicism*, 10ff.

20. Schmitt, *Land and Sea*, 4.

of human existence” inherent in air and fire? The progress of technology away from its “terrestrial or maritime foundation” means that “today, it is conceivable that the air will envelop the sea and perhaps the earth, and that men will transform their planet into a combination of produce warehouse and aircraft carrier.”<sup>21</sup> Aerial bombardments, outer space exploration, and satellite telecommunications have changed the spatiality of human existence, not to mention the relation to the earth and the sea now observable (and, hence, to some extent already dominated) from above. (Most recently, Peter Sloterdijk has explored this dimension of elemental politics in *Terror from the Air* [2009]). “The invention of the airplane,” Schmitt writes in an earlier text, “marked the conquest of the third element, after those of land and sea...It is easy to understand why the air force was called the ‘space weapon.’...[A]ir [became] the new elemental space of human existence. To the two mythical creatures, leviathan and behemoth, a third would be added, quite likely in the shape of a big bird.”<sup>22</sup> More so than water, air is the element of “groundlessness” and uncertainty, of risk and unpredictability. For those who wish to tackle this new element, time-tested methods prove to be useless, and thinking dangerously verges on pure speculation. Caution is recommended to all those who venture in their theorizing beyond the solidity of the earth, lest they give in to “ruminations in which serious thinking is too tightly bound to speculation that partakes of pure fantasy, and so leaves too much to the imagination.”<sup>23</sup> Dealing with the politics of air, we run the risk of thinking in the clouds, a charge Aristophanes leveled against Socrates and the Athenian Academy in his well-known comedy at the very inception of the metaphysical era.

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21. Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth*, 49.

22. Schmitt, *Land and Sea*, 58. Likewise, in *The Nomos of the Earth* Schmitt states: “Today, as a result of a new spatial phenomenon—the possibility of a domination of air space—firm land and free sea alike are being altered drastically, both in and of themselves and in relation to each other. Not only are the dimensions of territorial sovereignty changing, not only is the efficacy and velocity of the means of human power, transport, and information changing, but so, too, is the content of this *effectivity*.” (48)

23. Schmitt, *Land and Sea*, 58.

Needless to say, the situation of thinking is ever more extreme when it turns toward the element of fire, which threatens to burn and destroy whoever wishes to make it into an object of knowledge. And yet, theoretical ventures beyond the geo-politico-philosophical milieu are worth the effort and the risk, because they hold the potential for disclosing a global transformation now under way more so than in Schmitt's twentieth century.

The danger-fraught path of thinking, on which Schmitt has reluctantly embarked, leads him to at least one erroneous conclusion. In his periodization of the politics of the earth, water, air, and fire, he lines up the elements in what appears to be a linear succession, or a continuous chain. The progressive detachment from the originality of the earth is accompanied by a nostalgic yearning for the lost ground and the desire to see through the germination of a new constellation of power conducive to the revival of the *nomos* of the earth. It is, however, unwarranted to comprehend the association of human activity with various elements in terms of a straightforward drifting away from, a forgetting, or a suppression of the terrestrial origin. Schmitt reveals one of the reasons for this simplification of elemental politics set in its historical context when he writes (or, to be more precise, tells his young daughter Anima, who had listened to the text of what was later to become *Land and Sea* as though it had been an exciting bedtime story<sup>24</sup>) that “[a]ccording to an ancient belief, the whole history of mankind is but a voyage through the four elements.”<sup>25</sup> This is emphatically not the sense of the Heraclitus Fragment 25, to which the German thinker is tacitly referring, “Fire lives the death of earth, and air lives the death of fire; water lives the death of air, and earth that of water.” Without denying the difficulty of the fragment, it would be fair to say that the relation between fire and the earth, etc. is not that of a simple succession, punctuated by radical breaks, but, rather, that of survival: to live the death of another element is to lead its afterlife<sup>26</sup>. Interpreted politically,

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24. Müller, *A Dangerous Mind*, 46.

25. Schmitt, *Land and Sea*, 58.

26. The same interpretation is advanced by Fink and Heidegger in the *Heraclitus Seminar*, 82.

the first part of the fragment means that in the age dominated by pyropolitics we live the death of the *nomos* of the earth and that something of international law grounded in the *jus publicum Europaeum* survives its deracination. Today's political ontology unfolds on the ruins of the grand geopolitical systems of the past, the systems whose fault-lines, coordinates of order and orientation, and *nomoi* survive the death of geopolitics (live the Heraclitean "death of the earth,") long after the destruction of the context, or the world, wherein they used to be meaningful. The segregation walls and separation fences now being erected everywhere from the US-Mexico frontier to the imposed Israeli-Palestinian border are symptomatic of the death throes of past geopolitics, to which state actors cling in reaction to the pyropolitical "terrorist attacks" and other "national security threats."

### Schmitt on Fire

Another clue to the non-successive ordering of the elements in history is the co-origination of the politics of air and that of fire, born alongside, if not right in the midst, of the former: "If one thinks of the technical-machinic means and energy necessary for human prowess to manifest itself in airspace, and of the engines that propel airplanes, it seems that the proper new element of human activity [*eigentlich neue Element menschliche Aktivität*] is fire."<sup>27</sup> The energy needed for the politics of air literally to take off the ground derives from the fire (which, itself, requires oxygen for burning) of combustion engines, as much as from the more amorphous and metaphorical fire synonymous with the explosive potential of the human spirit. Generally speaking, pyropolitics, the coordinates of which are yet to be determined, seems so ubiquitous that it permeates all periods of human history, for instance, in the form of revolutionary "sparks" and explosions overturning *ancien regimes* in France, Russia, and elsewhere. The myth of Prometheus, who stole the fire of the gods and bestowed it as a gift upon humanity, points out that power and control have been associated with fire since the earliest periods of human history. The Byzantine secret weapon called "Greek fire,"<sup>28</sup>

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27. Schmitt, *Land and Sea*, 58.

28. Schmitt, *Land and Sea*, 8.

and also known as “sea fire,” *pur thelassion*, or “war fire,” *polemikōn pur*, was said to burn even under water and to effectively sink enemy vessels; it allowed Constantinople to maintain its strategic advantage over its foes and to survive. In other words, the politics of fire, already inherent in other elemental regimes, merely gets accentuated and comes into sharper relief in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. What, then, is the significance of the ubiquitous pyropolitics and what are the effects of this element, translated into political terms?

The thesis I wish to advance in response to the above question is that pyropolitics is coextensive with the concept and the event of the political. To defend this thesis, I will sketch the outlines of pyropolitics as they emerge from the references scattered throughout Schmitt’s texts, keeping in mind that the literal and the metaphorical invocations of fire bleed into each other and converge in a coherent image of something the German thinker was reluctant to bring explicitly into view, to formalize, or to thematize. It is my hope that the outline of the Schmittian politics of fire will prove much more than an idle curiosity, or a deconstructive exercise in mining the fertile margins of his texts for the somewhat unexpected fleeting references; instead, it will furnish us with a condensed, miniature version of the general logic underpinning pyropolitics, the logic that conditions political phenomena well in excess of Schmitt’s writings.

The difficulty of the task at hand should not be underestimated. It is virtually impossible to “outline” the contours of the politics of fire both because it is an elemental regime that is still too fresh, too precarious, too indeterminate to provide materials for an accurate historical-philosophical judgment and because, in and of itself, it is bereft of clear boundaries, precise outlines, and spatial confines. Rather than a mere limitation to our understanding, this second reason hints, albeit negatively and obliquely, at the overall character of pyropolitics. Each element presupposes a peculiar awareness of space and a unique concept of spatiality, depending on whether collective existence orients itself inland, faces the sea from the edge of the territory’s shore, views national territory from the vantage point of marine expanses as a mere shoreline, or begins to observe, if only with the help of images and the power of imagination, both land and sea from above, from the utterly groundless

and detached aerial perspective. The variegated shifts in the human representation of spatiality are explicable within the theoretical context of what Schmitt terms *Raumrevolution*, “space revolution,” whereby “all important changes in history more often than not imply a new image of space [*Raumbildes*].”<sup>29</sup> Fire, on the other hand, seems to bear no relation to spatiality whatsoever—for what would it mean to experience the other elements from the standpoint of fire? Wouldn’t experience *from* fire be a sheer impossibility? But what if the exact opposite is the case? What if fire heralds the most profound *Raumrevolution* yet, one where we witness the spatial negation of space, consistent with the apparent de-materialization of political practices, removed from the concreteness of the earth?

The dissolution of perceptible outlines in the political “domain,” which consequently becomes less of a “sphere” or an inhabitable *domus*, corresponds to and hinges upon the dissolution of the figure of the enemy, which Schmitt chillingly described in the concluding pages of *Theory of the Partisan*. Here, too, the transition from the “real enemy” to “absolute enmity” is conditioned by the fact that the politics of the earth has become a thing of the past. “Another limitation of enmity,” Schmitt notes, “follows from the telluric character of the partisan. He defends a piece of land with which he has an autochthonous relation.”<sup>30</sup> Initially, it was the enclosure of the earth that delimited politics, which is to say, bracketed hostilities by situating them against a common horizon; friends and enemies alike found their respective places in relation to this third—geographical or geometrical—neutral element and, hence, maintained a possibility of reconciling amongst themselves<sup>31</sup>.

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29. Schmitt, *Land and Sea*, 29.

30. Schmitt, *Theory of the Partisan*, 92.

31. Such, also, is the sense of Derrida’s interpretation of Schmitt. In relative or relativized enmity, the enemy “would gain reassuring and ultimately appeasing contours, because they would be *identifiable*. The figure of the enemy would then be helpful—precisely as a figure—because of the features which allow it to be identified as such, still identical to what has always been determined under this name.” Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, 83.

Once the terrestrial horizon, on which the figures of friends and enemies had emerged in all their determinacy, concreteness and “reality,” disappeared, the figure of the enemy got distended, its outlines blurred. Pyropolitical enemies are, at the same time, everywhere and nowhere because they bear little relation to the earth (from which they are “unchained,”<sup>32</sup>) or, for that matter, to any other spatially bound element. And their indeterminacy is mirrored in the attitude of “absolute enmity,” enmity “so frightful that perhaps one no longer should speak of enemy and enmity, and both should be outlawed and damned in all their forms before the work of destruction can begin. Then, the destruction will be completely abstract and completely absolute.”<sup>33</sup> Still prior to the material annihilation of the enemy, a more thorough, because abstract and ideal, eradication takes place: the enemy is destroyed as a figure and as a concept. This, however, does not make enemies disappear but, on the contrary, renders them potentially omniscient, to the extent that, uncontainable by figural contours and conceptual representations, they elude the mechanisms of recognition. Corresponding to the figureless and imperceptible enemy is the absolute, unlimited, unrestricted attitude of enmity, absolved from the concreteness of context and horizon. Such an attitude, in turn, is in sync with the possibility of total annihilation announced by the un-bracketed and “nonconventional” warfare that threatens not only a delimited national territory but also whole regions of the world and the planet as a whole.

The spatial negation of space implicit in absolute enmity is the overarching context for the ultimate means of destruction to have come out of the Second World War, the atomic bomb. While the explosion in general is a symbol of pyropolitics, as French professor of law Ernest Roguin critically acknowledged in the early years of the twentieth century<sup>34</sup>, the atomic bomb is unique, since its destructive potential threatens the entire earth. A weapon capable of devastation so extreme

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32. Schmitt, *Theory of the Partisan*, 54.

33. Schmitt, *Theory of the Partisan*, 94.

34. Roguin, *Traité de Droit Civil Comparé*, xviii.

as to reach planetary proportions has broken with the politics of the earth, with the sense of measure and moderation inherent in it, and with the *nomos* born of this politics. Atomic and hydrogen bombs are uncontainable by any lines of legality, friendship or enmity; they will always fall “beyond,” *jenseits*, the “new amity lines.”<sup>35</sup> The excessive detachment from the earth, which has now become a possible object of annihilation, means that the lines of *nomos* have grown irrelevant to pyropolitics. Asking himself in one of his diaries which “line” will become predominant after the atomic explosion, Schmitt responds: “No global line in the sense of *raya*, amity line, or the line of the Western Hemisphere...and, in general, no line whatsoever, but only space [*Keine globale Linie, im Sinne der Raya, Amity line oder Linie der westlichen Hemisphäre...sondern überhaupt keine Linie mehr, sondern ein Raum...*].”<sup>36</sup> If, after the explosion, only space remains, this is because the spatial negation of space has emptied that which is negated of all inner determinations, has erased all traces and lines engraved on the surface of the earth. The erasure of the line is another piece of evidence for a radical departure from the politics of the earth, whose division was instrumental to the emergence of the first *nomos*.

Henceforth, it will be impossible to find one’s bearings in a concrete elemental order, to find and to represent one’s place within the enviroing context of the element, given the disappearance of those linear determinations that turn space into an inhabitable place. Within the terms of the geopolitical and modern consciousness, the effects of pyropolitics and our place in it are unrepresentable, if not sublime. Differently put, the fire of absolute enmity and of the atomic explosion burns without illuminating, without clarifying anything, without giving rise to the event of a new *nomos*. It is the fire of destitution, as opposed to institution, to use the favorite distinction of Reiner Schürmann<sup>37</sup>. Fire, nonetheless, produces multiple effects; besides the forever present possibility of burning (up) whatever or whoever approximates it, fire

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35. Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth*, 49.

36. Schmitt, *Glossarium*, 180-1.

37. Cf. Schürmann, *Broken Hegemonies*, *passim*.

casts a glow on things, warms those who are shivering of cold, brings about a transformation from one state into another... And the same manifold effects emanate from pyropolitics.

Tapping into what, without a doubt, is a part of the quotidian discourse surrounding revolutionary or subversive activity, Schmitt considers the partisans as bearers of political sparks capable of kindling a larger fire of total politicization<sup>38</sup>. To the extent that the previously apolitical (or “neutral”) civilians are embroiled in partisan combat—whether fighting or aiding and abetting guerilla fighters—politics, in the sense of existential conflict and the fateful friend-enemy distinction, turns into an integral part of their lives. Surprisingly, the increased risk associated with this enterprise pales in comparison to the protective function of the revolutionary spark: besides maintaining a certain intensity of the political alive, it keeps the partisan, *qua* political subject, sheltered, safe in its glow, *Glut*: “The spark that jumped from Spain to the North in 1808 found in Berlin a theoretical form that made it possible to protect him [the partisan] in its glow [*ihn in seiner Glut zu behüten*]...”<sup>39</sup> The glow of revolutionary fire warms political subjects, providing them with a source of motivation for a continued struggle, and allows them to attain political subjectivity in the first place<sup>40</sup>. It

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38. “At that time, a spark [*ein Funke*] jumped from Spain to the North. It did not ignite the same fire [*denselben Brand*] that gave the Spanish guerrilla war its world-historical significance. But it produced an effect whose continuation today, in the second half of the 20th century, changes the face of the earth and her humanity.” (Schmitt, *Theory of the Partisan*, 6-7).

39. Schmitt, *Theory of the Partisan*, 47, translation modified.

40. In a recent article, Banu Bargu goes as far as to consider the revolutionary spark as a symbol of constitutive politics: “In this light, we can better appreciate why Schmitt refers to the partisan as the “spark” that ignites a fire. This fire represents the elemental forces of the people to shape the fate of their community. Popular intervention is instigated by crises, such as foreign occupation, outbreak of war or general strike. Extraordinary moments enable the activation of constituent power that, under normal conditions, remains an invisible support of the constitutional order.” (2010) In pyropolitical terms, this implies that the volcanic and fiery activity of constituent power underlies and dislocates the static crusts of instituted law and order, akin to the outer layers of the earth.

does not grant protection to the partisans' physical lives—quite to the contrary, their lives are now endangered more than ever—but it does preserve their existence as subjects, that is to say, as political subjects.

Although fire lacks definitive contours, its glow permits the beings who or that gather around it to come to light, if only temporarily, to exhibit themselves within concrete outlines, and, therefore, to be. In the glow of revolutionary fire, be it as miniscule as the one cast by a spark, partisans rise to the level of political subjectivity, otherwise denied to them by the status quo that seeks their criminalization and delegitimization. Pyropolitics is, therefore, the condition of possibility for political phenomenality, for the appearing of political actors as such. And yet, the partisans are defined, precisely, by their clandestine activities, by their non-appearance on a well-illuminated political stage, by their operations in the “underground”—for instance, in the thick of a forest. How to explain this ostensible paradox? Note, first of all, the kind of light that emanates from a spark, the glow of which is dim enough to keep the partisan unidentifiable from the standpoint of “regular army” and of the political state. Unlike phenomenology, on the one hand, with its fascination for the eidetic—as well as the literal—light without warmth, and ethics, on the other hand, with its adherence to the warmth of interpersonal intimacy without light, pyropolitics combines both effects of fire. The glow it spreads is different from the light of phenomenology, in that it leaves enough room for the non-identifiable, the secret, the shadows, and the *arcana* indispensable, according to Schmitt, to any political practice. And the warmth it emits is dissimilar to that of ethics (with the possible exception of the ethical thought of Emmanuel Levinas), in that it may, at any given moment, burn those basking in it, consuming their entire being.

Whereas the pyropolitical glow is scarce enough to occlude the identities of those it illuminates, the warmth of this fire is immeasurable, potentially immense, and overwhelming, depending on the intensity of antagonisms ignited between particular friend and enemy groupings. Indeed, Schmitt describes the movement of politicization, when various standoffs and oppositions in areas of human activity—such as the economic sphere—attain the level of existential friend-enemy conflicts, in a way reminiscent of the transformative effects of fire. The Heraclitean

*pyros tropai* (transformative fire) is not far behind our theoretical horizon when we carefully read the praise Schmitt lavishes on the dialectical transition from quantity to quality in Hegel's *Logic*: "That is Hegel's *Hic Rodus* and the genuineness of a philosophy which does not permit the fabrication of intellectual traps...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."<sup>41</sup> The transformation of quantitatively intense economic, aesthetic, or other antagonisms into purely political confrontations should be interpreted in terms of reaching a "boiling point," as Heinrich Meier has it<sup>42</sup>, the critical quantitative point where qualitative change from one state (liquid; economic) to another (vaporous; political) occurs. On a lighter note, it is not by chance that Lenin is said to have quipped that under communism every cook should be able to run the government<sup>43</sup>, for who, if not the cook, knows better the exact point where the transformations triggered by fire take place? In the politicization of the dialectical transition, then, we get acquainted with the fine differentiations proper to fire that, rather than engrave lines and traces in the solid substratum of the earth, leads to more drastic ontological discernments between quantity and quality, the political and the provisionally apolitical. Just as in Heraclitus *pyros tropai* implies the kind of transformation where "everything goes over into everything" and nothing retains the definitiveness of its character<sup>44</sup>, so in Schmitt all spheres of human activity lose their identity and become totally politicized upon contact with the transformative fire of intense antagonism.

From the brief overview thus far it should be obvious that pyropolitics is fraught with risk, not the least the risk of succumbing to

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41. Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 62.

42. Meier, *The Lesson of Carl Schmitt*, 35.

43. Moore, *Soviet Politics*, 175.

44. Heidegger & Fink, *Heraclitus Seminar*, 11.

the annihilating fire that burns without illuminating, without shedding light on that which it transforms. For all his caution and a general conservative worldview, Schmitt believes that that risk must be assumed, not evaded, in order for the political ontology of human beings not to dissolve in the sea of indifference, apathy, and de-politicization typical of liberal parliamentary democracies. On the subject of the latter, he writes: “Many norms of contemporary parliamentary law...function as a result like a superfluous decoration, useless and even embarrassing, as though someone has painted the radiator of a modern central heating system with red flames in order to give the appearance of a blazing fire.”<sup>45</sup> When political oppositions undergo sublimation into material for endless parliamentary discussions and debates, the transformative fire of politics is reduced to a mere caricature, to something given to sight without opening the field of vision or letting beings and events be seen. The red flames painted on a radiator give off an illusion of political activity but, in any event, they neither shine forth nor emit heat. The “modern central heating system,” with a fake fire depicted on it, is an apposite allegory of the modern political system, where conflicts turn into nothing more than differences in opinion and where the risk and existential danger that accompany friend-enemy formations are relegated to the margins of the Western geopolitical scheme; Iraq and Afghanistan have long become the familiar designations for these margins. The state of exception that reigns “beyond the lines” of the humanitarian order and universal human rights stands in sharp contrast to the taming of political risk and the obfuscation of existential danger by liberal democracies. The heat of the radiator, compared to that of fire, is domesticated, fully regulated, placed in the service of the domicile it warms up and provides with the comfort and convenience that a mechanical system affords. The unpredictable, but also the luminous, core of fire is evacuated from these political regimes obsessed with risk avoidance and total de-politicization.

The main reason behind the criticisms Schmitt levels against liberal democracy is that the risk of not taking risks outweighs any concrete danger lurking in a confrontation with the enemy: it spells out

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45. Schmitt, *Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, 6.

the automatic and consensual termination of political existence<sup>46</sup>. In our terms, this means that—the distinction between the enabling-constructive and the disabling-destructive varieties of pyropolitics notwithstanding—the risk of pyropolitics is irrecusable. Still, the sign that Schmitt’s conservatism has gained an upper hand, leading him to disavow the politics of fire, is his frequent self-identification as “the Christian Epimetheus,”<sup>47</sup> the prototype he adopts from the German poet, Konrad Weiss. The exact opposite of his forward-looking brother Prometheus, Epimetheus is absorbed in an “active contemplation” of the already “completed events,” in an effort to tease out of them “the dark meaning of our history.”<sup>48</sup> Epimetheus, moreover, keeps closer to the natural realm and to the affairs of the earth (distributing the gifts of positive traits to animals) than his renegade brother, who grants to humans the gift of fire, the arts, and technicity<sup>49</sup>. Given the choice between a personification of geopolitics, in the most basic and powerful sense of the term, and a figuration of pyropolitics, between Epimetheus and Prometheus, Schmitt opts for the telluric and *terrorist* image of the god-fearing brother. (In fact, a good alternative title for *Roman Catholicism and the Political Form* would have been *The Doctrine of a Young Christian Epimetheus*.) In doing so, he ultimately rejects the politics of fire and countersigns his name *against* the unmatched dangers and risks it carries with it. But, in light of everything that has happened since Schmitt’s death in 1985, do we still have the luxury of a choice between geopolitics and pyropolitics? Hasn’t the politics of fire irrevocably supplanted the politics of the earth and isn’t the trace of this supplanting detectable in every “suicide bombing,” which has become

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46. For a detailed analysis of political risk in Schmitt, refer to Chapter 2 of *Groundless Existence*.

47. See Schmitt’s *Ex Captivitate Salus*, 12; *Glossarium* 66; “Three Possibilities,” 170.

48. Schmitt, “Three Possibilities,” 170.

49. For an original reading of the myth of Epimetheus, see Stiegler’s *Technics and Time I* (1998), especially Part II of the book, titled “The Fault of Epimetheus.” For Plato’s recounting of the myth, see *Protagoras*, 320d-322a.

a global phenomenon, as well as in the new instantiations of absolute enmity based on differences in religious creed? Wouldn't the most constructive response to this political ground-shift, finally, be a sustained rethinking of the pyropolitical legacy, including its venerable revolutionary tradition, and an adaptation of this tradition to the age of post-metaphysical politics?

Pining for the lost immediacy of the human relation to nature, Epimetheus, who withholds fire from the mortals, glances back and is absorbed in a contemplation of the past he is unable to revitalize. Nostalgic for the politics of the earth, with its—however contrived—simplicity and innocence, the Christian Epimetheus looks back at the dramatic opposition of land and sea in a full realization that both elements have been surpassed as the organizing metaphors and mythic representations of the political. Reluctantly, he bestows the gift (and the curse) of the politics of fire onto his contemporaries, in the hope that the new “meaningful proportions [*sinnvolle Proportionen*]”<sup>50</sup> of the world will, phoenix-like, issue forth from it.

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50. Schmitt, *Land and Sea*, 59.

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