

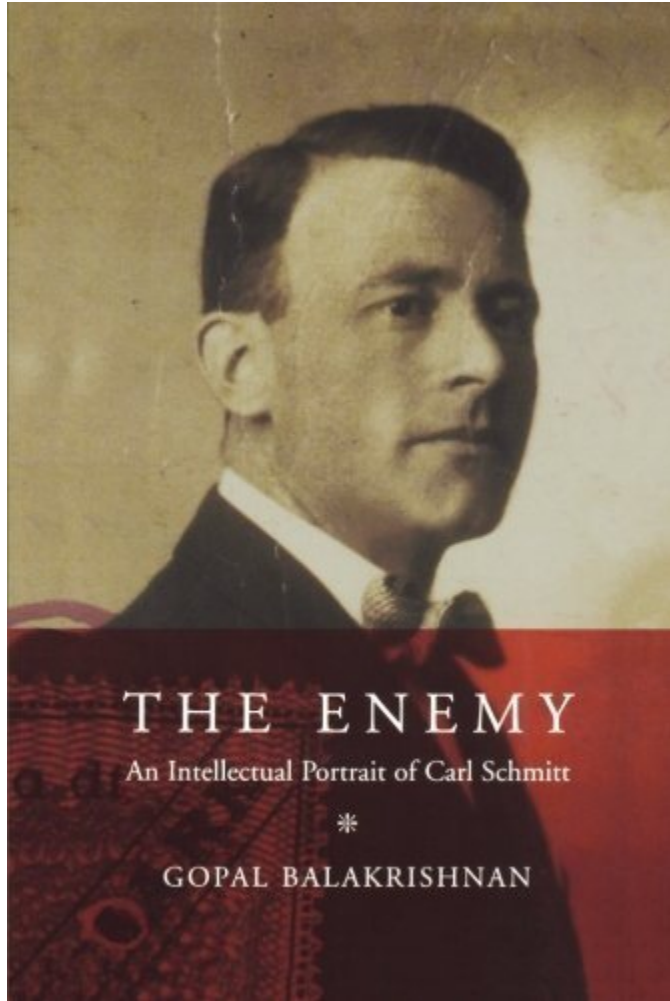


CARL SCHMITT: THE MAN AND HIS IDEAS

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Carl Schmitt, preeminent antiliberal, is that rare thing, the modern political philosopher relevant long after his time. The simple remember him only for his grasping embrace of Nazism, but the more astute, especially on the Left, have in recent times found much to ponder in Schmitt's protean writings.



He did not offer ideology, as did so many forgotten political philosophers, but instead clear analysis of power relations, untied to any specific system or regime.

So, as the neoliberal new world order collapses, and the old dragons of man, lulled for decades by the false promises of liberal democracy, rise from slumber, such matters are become relevant once more, and Schmitt informs our times, echoing, as they do, his times.

This book, Gopal Balakrishnan's The Enemy, slickly analyzes Schmitt's complex and often contradictory writings. Because Schmitt offered no system, and often contradicted himself in sequential writings, or at least offered ideas hard to rationalize with each other, too often he is seen as an "affectively charged symbol, not as someone whose thought could be understood through a comprehensive and

systematic study."

Balakrishnan's goal is to accomplish that latter task. "My objective is to reconstruct the main lines of his thought from 1919 to 1950 by identifying the problems he was addressing in context."

The author makes clear up front that he wants to explore Schmitt's thought, objectively, not through the lens of his association with Nazism: "Those who still insist on adopting the role of either prosecutor or defence attorney in discussing Schmitt can, I hope, be convinced that there are far more interesting issues involved."

And, critically, while Balakrishnan is a leftist, his views never, as far as I can tell, infect the text in any way—perhaps, in part, because he feels strongly that Schmitt is not himself monolithically on the Right.

I have not read any Schmitt directly, yet, and so I cannot say if Balakrishnan's summaries of Schmitt's thought are accurate or complete. But I turned to Schmitt because his name kept coming up in [modern books](#) by leftists (and was used by #NeverTrumper Bill Kristol when trying to tar his opponents).

Certainly, at first glance, his thought is relevant [not only to the Left](#), but is just as relevant for today's reactionaries, such as me.

This is because Schmitt's thought did not revolve around a retreat to the past, imaginary or otherwise. He was not interested in such restorationism; he correctly saw it as a false path. Rather, all of Schmitt's thought revolved around taking what exists today and, informed by the past instead of by some Utopian ideology, creating the future. He was master of identifying and rejecting the historical anachronism in favor of reality; such clarity is one key to effective Reaction.

Born in 1888, of a provincial Roman Catholic family in the Rhineland, Schmitt studied jurisprudence (which then included political science and political philosophy) in Berlin in the early 1900s.

At that time, the legal philosophy of positivism dominated German thinking. Positivism held that the law consisted only of, and was derived only from, legal pronouncements, and formed a seamless whole through and by which all legal decisions could be made uniformly and predictably, if only one looked hard enough.

This, a modernist concept beloved of liberals, had erased the earlier philosophy of natural law, under which much of the law existed outside specific legal mandates written down in books, whether divinely mandated or the result of custom and human nature.

Schmitt's early writings expressed some doubt about positivism, which in the pre-war years had come under some attack as permitting, then ignoring, gaps, as well as for ignoring who made the law. The war, however, firmly set his thought on the path it was to take for the rest of his long life, which was

opposition to positivism, as well as all other liberal forms of law.

Schmitt volunteered, but due to an injury, served in a non-combat capacity in Berlin. Here Schmitt associated not with the Prussian elite, but with a more bohemian crowd.

After the war and the post-war revolutionary disturbances, the mainline left-center parties, over the objections of the defeated rightists and cutting out the violent Left, promulgated the Weimar constitution, in August of 1919.

This document governed Germany until 1933, and it was ultimately the springboard for the most important of Schmitt's thought. But Schmitt's first major work was not on the new constitution; it was a book about aesthetics as related to politics, *Political Romanticism*.

Here, he attacked the German Romantics for refusal to politically commit, instead remaining detached observers of critical events, manipulating words to create emotional effect while standing back from history. They would not decide what was worth fighting for; they merely engaged in "endless conversation," all talk, no action.

As Balakrishnan notes, this book is neither Left nor Right, and one cannot tell where on the political spectrum the author fell, though Romanticism was generally associated with the Right. Schmitt even cited Karl Marx to support his arguments. He thus, at this point, had very little in common with the anti-Weimar Conservative Revolutionaries, men such as [Arthur Moeller van den Bruck](#) or [Ernst Jünger](#). Not that he was a man of the Left; he was merely hard to classify.

Declining to work in government, Schmitt began his academic career in Munich, and in 1921 published *The Dictator*. Though the book was written earlier, 1921 was immediately after the various Communist revolts, as well as the Kapp Putsch; the political situation was, to say the least, still unsettled.

Article 48 of the new Weimar Constitution allowed the new office of President to rule by decree, using the army, in order to ensure "public safety," a provision that assumed immense importance later.

Even though he mentioned this power, *The Dictator* wasn't narrowly focused on Weimar; it was an analysis of all emergency power itself, and its use in the gaps that existed even under a system of legal positivism, where gaps were supposed to not exist.

Schmitt maintained that dictatorial power of some sort was essential in a political system, but distinguished between "commissarial dictatorship," used to defend the existing constitutional order through temporary suspension (with the classic example of the Roman dictator), and "sovereign dictatorship," a body or person acting to dissolve the old constitution and create a new one, in the name of, or on behalf of, the people as a whole.

The commissarial dictator has no power to change the structures or order of the state, which remained unchanged and in a sense unsullied by the dictator's necessary actions; the sovereign dictator does have such power.

This had obvious applications to Weimar, but Schmitt did not focus on the modern; instead, his analysis revolved around sixteenth-century France, where the King claimed the right to suspend customary right in the execution of royal justice.

Opposed to the King were the [Monarchomachs](#), part of a long tradition of political philosophy holding that a tyrannical or impious king could justly be overthrown, and that no extraordinary measures could be taken by the king without tyranny.

In between was [Jean Bodin](#), author of [The Six Books of the Republic](#), who argued that the king could indeed overthrow customary law, but only in exceptional situations, and only to the extent he did not violate natural law as it ruled persons and property.

This view, endorsed by Schmitt, rejects [Machiavelli's instrumentalism](#), and holds that the dictator is he, of whatever origin, who executes a commissarial dictatorship, as opposed to a sovereign, one who claims the right to execute a sovereign dictatorship. In the modern context, though, for Schmitt, the sovereign dictatorship is not always illegitimate, because the old structures have imploded.

What was wrong for the King of France in the sixteenth century was right for the Germans in 1919. That is, through his analysis, Schmitt concluded that the Weimar Constitution was wholly legitimate, even though it was the result of a sovereign dictatorship, because the sovereign dictator, the provisional legislative power, the *pouvoir constituant* (the power that makes the constitution), existed for a defined term and then dissolved itself.

The resulting political problem, though, was that if a new constitution was promulgated in the name of the people, the people remained extant, as a separate point of reference, from which "emerges ever new forms, which it can at any time shatter, never limiting itself."

This, combined with the revolutionary proletariat threatening civil society, created at least the conceptual need for quick elevation of a commissarial dictator, to deal with illegitimate revolutions, before the possible need for a sovereign dictator arose. Such was [Cavaignac's](#) suppression of the Paris mob in 1848.

(It is no accident that Schmitt's book, [Dictatorship](#)'s subtitle, often omitted in mentions of it, is "From the Beginnings of the Modern Conception of Sovereignty to the Proletarian Class Struggle," and Schmitt has much to say about internal Marxist debates of the time, another reason he is still read by the Left).

Schmitt viewed Article 48 as authorizing such a commissarial dictatorship—but under no circumstances authorizing a sovereign dictatorship, which had been foreclosed upon the promulgation of the new constitution, whatever external threats might still exist. Though that did not preclude, perhaps, another such moment, which, in fact, arrived soon enough.

As you can tell, *The Enemy* is in essence a sequential look at Schmitt's written output, trying to fit each piece into the context of its immediate time, and with other pieces of Schmitt's work. Balakrishnan next covers two short but influential books revolving around Roman Catholicism, Political Theology and Roman Catholicism and Political Form.

Although often Schmitt is seen as a Catholic thinker, he had a tense relationship with the Church (not helped by his inability to get an annulment for his first marriage), and much of his thinking was more Gnostic than Catholic. While very different from each other, both books more clearly set out Schmitt's views on how European decline could be stopped, and it was not by more liberalism.

Political Theology begins with one of Schmitt's most famous lines: "Sovereign is he who decides on the emergency situation." The book is an exploration of what the rule of law is, in real life, not in theory; an attack on legal positivism as Utopian through a presentation of the critical gaps that positivism could not address; and an explication of the actual practice of provisions like Article 48.

Someone must be in charge when it really matters, in the "state of emergency"; who is that to be? It is not decided, at its root, by positive law; deep down, it is a theological question (hence the title).

Turning from his earlier suggestion that only a commissarial dictatorship was typically necessary, Schmitt came closer to endorsing sovereign dictatorship of an individual, not derived from the people, in opposition to the menace of proletarian revolution.

He praised another anti-proletarian of 1848, the obscure Spaniard [Juan Donoso Cortes](#), who saw "reactionary adventurers heading regimes no longer sanctioned by tradition," such as [Napoleon](#), as the men who would fight back atheism and Communism, until the earthly eschaton would restore traditional rule.

This vision did not entrance Schmitt for long; it smacked too much of restorationism, of trying to turn back the clock, rather than creating a new thing informed by the old. Still, this was and is one of Schmitt's most influential books.

Less influential, perhaps, but more interesting to me, is Roman Catholicism and Political Form. Schmitt had fairly close ties to the Catholic Center Party, but this book is not a political work. Nor is it a book of natural law; as Balakrishnan says, in it "names like Augustine and Aquinas are nowhere to be found.

His portrayal of the political identity of the Church was a cocktail of themes from Dostoevsky, [Léon Bloy](#), [Georges Sorel](#) and [Charles Maurras](#)." A diverse group, that.

The book portrayed the Roman Church as the potential pivot around which liberalism and aggressively sovereign monarchs of the old regimes could be brought together, through its role in myth and in standing above and apart from the contending classes, as well as being representative of all classes and peoples. (It sounds like this book has a lot in common with a current fascination of some on the American right, [Catholic integralism](#), a topic I am going to take up soon).

What the people thought didn't matter, but they should be represented and guided, in their own interests, by a combination of aristocrats and clerics, presumably.

Both these books, and for that matter all of Schmitt's thought, saw modernity as a mistake, however characterized: as bourgeois capitalism, liberal democracy, or what have you. Spiritually arid, divisive, atomizing, impractical, and narrow, it had no future; the question was what future Europe was to have instead.

In 1923 Germany, it certainly seemed that things were about to fall apart, which called forth Schmitt's next work, translated as [The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy](#) (though as Balakrishnan points out, and I have enough German to have noticed first myself, a better translation of the title is *The Spiritual-Historical Situation of Today's Parliamentarianism*; the word "crisis" is not in the original title).

Here Schmitt lurched away from the idea of the sovereign imposing good government on the masses, and focused on the mass, the mobilization of the multitude that can give authority to the sovereign who decides on the state of exception, citing men like the violent French syndicalist Georges Sorel and impressing on the reader the power of political myth, rather than Roman Catholic truth.

Schmitt discussed the tension between liberalism and democracy, among other things focusing on rational discourse as the key to any parliamentary system, and that rational discourse tends to be lacking in proportion to the amount of direct democracy in a system, though Schmitt attributed that to the power of political myths creating political unity, not to the ignorance and credulity of the masses, as I would.

(This was once something that was universally recognized and assumed, but today the divide between rationality and democracy is ignored. This change, or debasement, derives from a combination of political ideology, in part informed by Marxism and cultural Marxism, and ignorance, from the forgetting of history and thousands of years of applied political thought. It will not end well).

Schmitt is not recommending a particular resolution or political program; Balakrishnan attributes that to Schmitt still building his own thought, without an ideological goal in mind.

To this extent, as I say, Schmitt is the correct type of reactionary: a man who sees what is wrong about today, and what is right about the past, and seeks to harmonize the two to create a better, but not Utopian, future.

Various other writings followed, responsive to the events of the 1920s. Among many interesting points, Balakrishnan notes that "Schmitt rejected what would later be called '[Atlanticism](#)': the idea that the USA and Western Europe belonged to a common civilization, and thus shared political interests."

(In the years after World War II this was a particular focus of Schmitt, giving him something in common with the later [French New Right](#), as well as the Left in general).

He also mocked the League of Nations; if what matters is who is sovereign, international "law" is the final proof of the contempt in which positivism should be held. He wrote a massive work on German constitutional law (which is untranslated to English), analyzing the relationship between democracy and the [Rechtstaat](#), the core structures of German law revolving around the rule of law, which did not presuppose any particular form of government.

In these writings, Schmitt addressed a wide range of thorny problems, including the legitimacy of law and who authorizes a new constitution, from which arise questions of legitimacy, and, just as importantly (and about to become more important at that time), questions of whose interpretation commands assent.

This latter set of questions began to crystallize Schmitt's adherence to "[decisionism](#)"—the idea that what matters, above all, to the legitimacy of a decision is not its content, or its tie to some underlying document or system, but that it be made by a legitimate authority. This is, needless to say, directly contrary to the claims of legal positivism.

As German politics moved toward its climax, Schmitt's next work was more theoretical, [The Concept of the Political](#) (first published in 1927, then substantially revised in 1932, in part as the result of correspondence with Leo Strauss). This book sounds like the most relevant to today, both in its topic and in the specifics it diagnoses about modern liberalism.

Its overarching theme is the most famous of Schmitt tropes: the enemy. While, like all Schmitt's works, this book is complex, its premise is that "the concept of the state presupposes the concept of the political," and what ultimately defines the political is the opposition between friend and enemy—not, as Balakrishnan notes, private friends and enemies, but political communities opposed to each other.

Politics is thus, at its core, not separate from the rest of life, but, ultimately, the way in which a political community determines its destiny, in opposition to those who hold incompatible beliefs, through violent conflict if necessary. This is an internal decision to each political community, not susceptible to

rational discussion with those outside the community, and it is not a moral, but rather a practical, decision.

Liberalism, which believes that politics is a matter of pure rationality with a moral overlay, not only misses the point, but by being wrong, exacerbates the chances of and costs of conflict, especially by turning all conflict into a crusade where the enemy is evil, rather than just different. Liberalism makes war and death more, rather than less, likely...

"Schmitt claimed that the logic of these decisions cannot be grasped from a non-partisan perspective. The point he was making was directed at those who, failing to understand the irreducibly partisan, emergent dynamics of such scenarios, see the causes of major political events in the small tricks and mistakes of individuals. Lenin, he said, understood that such people must be decisively refuted."

In fact, conflicts which seem irrational after the fact are not at all irrational; we just cannot, if we ever could, see clearly the rational impulses that drove them, which, again, boil down to the friend/enemy distinction.

In the late 1920s, Schmitt moved to Berlin, and became part of circles there, mostly conservative but idiosyncratically so. He became close friends with [Johannes Popitz](#) (later executed for his role in the [Stauffenberg plot](#)), who opened doors in government for Schmitt.

He wrote on various topics, including, interestingly, on technology, noting presciently "From its onset the twentieth century appears not only as the age of technology but as the age of religious belief in technology."

He did not think this was a good thing; it created unrealistic expectations, especially among the masses, and encouraged belief in technocratic, "Fordist" government, a disaster in the making, because technology could never solve human problems, or eradicate the friend/enemy distinction that underlay all human political relations—but it could make war worse, and it "dissolved the protective atmosphere of traditional morality which had shielded society from the dangers of nihilism."

In many places throughout his career, whatever his own religious beliefs, Schmitt was very clear that man needed the view of history as a struggle reaching toward redemption. The disappearance of that belief would destroy the enchantment of the world, but would not reduce conflict, which would be more and more meaningless.

That's pretty much the state we've reached today; Schmitt would not be surprised, nor he would be surprised by the attempt to resolve this problem by seeking redemption *through* technology.

As the clock ticked down to National Socialism in power, Schmitt became more involved in

government, especially in advocating various forms of constitutional interpretation. Among other works, he wrote *Legality and Legitimacy*, analyzing the tension between majority rule and the legitimacy of its decisions with respect to the minority, casting a jaundiced eye at the ability of liberals to resist Communists and Nazis.

At this point, in the early 1930s, he was anti-Nazi, but that changed as the Nazis came to power, and Schmitt (always keenly interested in his own career) saw on which side his bread was buttered, although he was also fascinated by the Nazis and what their rise said about politics and political conflict; moreover, he made the typical error of intellectuals, to believe that he could influence and control the powerful through his intelligence.

He ramped-up his own anti-Semitism and, infamously, publicly justified the Night of the Long Knives as "the leader protecting the law." Even here, he was precise in an interesting way—although his purpose was "nakedly apologetic," he objected to the retrospective legalization of the *Röhm purge*, holding that part of the role of the sovereign was, in extreme cases, to extra-legally implement actions dictated by the friend/enemy distinction.

Soon enough, though, despite his attempts to become ever more shrilly anti-Semitic (among other dubious offerings, suggesting that Jewish scholars referred to in books have an asterisk placed by their name to identify them as Jewish). But he was still viewed with suspicion by the Nazis, as a Catholic and an opportunist, and within a few years he was exiled from political life, before the war began.

He did not suffer worse consequences, in part because he was protected by Hermann Göring. Still, he kept writing, among other things, using Thomas Hobbes as a springboard, developing a theory of the supersession of nation states by larger blocs embracing satellite states, as well as related theories of the political implications of *Land and Sea*.

After the war, Schmitt refused to submit to any form of denazification, so although he was not prosecuted, he was barred from teaching for the rest of his life—another forty years. He maintained intellectual contacts with a wide circle, though, and remained somewhat influential—an influence that has increased since his death in 1985.

Most interesting to me in his later writings is Schmitt's theory of the *katechon*. This concept is taken from 2 Thessalonians, which discusses the Antichrist, the Man of Sin, who, verse 6 tells us, is restrained or "withheld" by a mysterious force, the *katechon*.

When the *katechon* is withdrawn, Antichrist will become fully manifest. Saint Paul, however, implies that his listeners know who the *katechon* is. Schmitt expanded this into an idea that some authority must restrain chaos and maintain order, perhaps the Emperor in Saint Paul's time, another force now—but not

the popular will, certainly, and not any element of liberal government.

To grasp the importance of this idea to Schmitt, it helps to know that he once wrote (although this quote is not in Balakrishnan's book), "The history of the world is like a ship careening aimlessly through the sea, manned by a bunch of drunken sailors who scream and dance until God thrusts the ship under the waves so there will be silence." Schmitt wasn't big on history having an arrow, a key claim of liberalism.

Into the idea of the *katechon* fit most of Schmitt's prior ideas, including the commissarial dictator, the sovereign who decides on the state of exception, and the variations on Hobbes's Leviathan that Schmitt explored.

That's not to say that Schmitt was predicting the rise of Antichrist, or offering a religious concept, rather that the acknowledging the key role of a Restrainer embodies the central theme of much of his thought. I think one can, perhaps, contrast such a role with the role suggested by the Left, of some person or a vanguard, who creates a wholly new system, often conceived of as Utopian.

In reactionary thought, therefore, the *katechon* plays the essential role of being rooted in reality and human nature; the force that, through a combination of power and inertia, prevents the horrors unleashed by Utopian ideology.

As can be seen from the title he chose, Balakrishnan sees the distinction, organically arising in every time and place without the will of anybody, between friend and enemy, as the key distinction of Schmitt's thought.

In Schmitt's own words, "Tell me who your enemy is and I will tell you who you are." You only have to pull a little on this string to come to disturbing conclusions, though, about today's America. If the premise is that at some point the members of a once-united nation can be split by a friend/enemy distinction, which is certainly objectively possible, the question only becomes how it can be determined if this has happened, and what to do then?

Certainly the American Left long since recognized, since it is the necessary belief of any ideological worldview seeking Utopian goals, who is friend and who is enemy. And even a casual listen to the words of the Left today, from their foot soldiers to their elites, reveals an explicit acknowledgement of this view.

It is not just ideological, either; the Left thrives on the solidarity that comes from recognizing who the enemy is. The American Right, on the other hand, is still delusionally trapped in the idea that [we can all get along](#), or at least, their leaders [hope to be eaten last](#).

Meanwhile the Left marches its columns ever deeper into enemy territory, stopping at nothing and only

avoiding widespread violence (though, certainly, there is plenty of [Left violence already](#)) because it is not yet adequately opposed. All this fits precisely into Schmitt's framework; the only surprise is the one-sided nature of the battle.

The Left's approach is subtly different, perhaps, than the one Schmitt outlined, because the Left insists on politicizing literally everything, rather than only the key points of difference (although maybe that is simply required battle on all fronts, since their ideology presupposes no private sphere).

This spreading thin, driven by ideology, potentially erodes their power, or would if they were being opposed at all, more so if effectively. Beyond that, though, the fatal weakness, in Schmittian terms, of the American Left's approach, is total lack of both any sovereign decision-maker or source of legitimacy for its decisions, even within a strictly intra-Left frame.

Perhaps this is a universal flaw of the ideological left, from the [French Revolution](#) on, and the source of the truism that Left revolutions eat their own. Without a sovereign, no stability, and no future—only the capacity for destruction, on full display now, after which those not poisoned by the beliefs of the Left pick up the pieces.

But first, they have to be recognized as enemies, and treated as such. No time like the present to begin, and better late than never. Certainly, a competent, disciplined leader on the Right could take Schmitt's theories and weave a coherent plan of defense and attack. Instead, we get Donald Trump, who is better than nothing, but not by much. Don't get depressed, though, since that Man of Destiny may be just over the horizon. 2019 will be soon enough.

Charles is a business owner and operator, in manufacturing, and a recovering big firm M&A lawyer. He runs the blog, [The Worthy House](#).

The [photo](#) shows, "Again," by Thomas Hart Benton, painted in 1941.

