



SOME INSIGHTS FROM CARL SCHMITT FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

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In order to interpret the present political situation, Carl Schmitt's thought is still topical; regardless of the many insights that can be drawn from it, at the present time some theses advocated by the Plettenberg thinker in the late 1920s and early 1960s, well before the contemporary "epoch," following the collapse of communism, the "rise" of globalization (and the death of the jurist), are particularly interesting.

First, it is appropriate to explain the extraordinary increase, a few years after the collapse of communism, of populo-sovereign-identitarian parties, by recalling what he wrote in his speech, "Das Zeitalter der Neutralisierung und Entpolitisierungen" ("[The Era of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations](#)"), (of 1929).

Schmitt argues in this text that European spiritual life has developed over the last four centuries (i.e., in modernity) by changing centers of reference (from the theological to the metaphysical, from this to the moral-humanitarian and finally to the economic): "If a domain of thought becomes central, then the problems of other domains are solved in terms of the central domain—they are considered secondary problems, whose solution follows as a matter of course only if the problems of the central domain are solved. In a theological age, everything runs smoothly if theological questions are in order; everything else is "provided" by definition. The same is true of other ages" (86).

This center of reference is decisive and prevalent" "Above all the state also derives its reality and power from the respective central domain, because the decisive disputes of friend-enemy groupings are also determined by it" (87).

He continues: "As long as religious-theological matters were the central focus, the maxim *cujus regio ejus religio*³ had a political meaning. When religious-theoretical matters ceased to dominate the central domain, this maxim also lost its practical import. In the meantime, however, it moved from the cultural stage of the nation and the principle of nationality (*cujus regio ejus natio*) to the economic domain, where it came to mean: one and the same state cannot accommodate two contradictory economic systems, i.e., capitalism and communism are mutually exclusive (87-88).

After the collapse of communism, the last exculpatory of the "political" (i.e., that between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat) disappeared. Fukuyama wrote that after the victory of liberal democracies, the end of history had come. This prediction is wrong because it presupposes the exhaustion of all reason for conflict; which is impossible because the element of conflict and struggle

(Machiavelli and Duverger among many) is a presupposition of the political that is connatural to it (Freund). To think that man, *zoon politikon*, can exist without a political dimension presupposes changing his nature, which is what the young Marx thought he could do and has instead turned out to be impossible.

Rather, the bourgeois/proletarian justification has been replaced by a different one. The transition between one friend/foe justification and the next, Schmitt wrote, has a decisive political effect: "The succession of stages—from the theological, over the metaphysical and the moral to the economic—simultaneously signifies a series of progressive neutralizations of domains whose centers have shifted" (89). In this process, "*The former central domain became neutralized in that it ceased to be the central domain,*" but at the same time and progressively "in the dialectic of such a development one creates a new domain of struggle precisely through the shifting of the central domain. In the new domain, at first considered neutral, *the antitheses of men and interests unfold* with a new intensity and become increasingly sharper. Europeans always have wandered from a conflictual to a neutral domain, and always the newly won neutral domain has become immediately *another arena of struggle, once again necessitating the search for a new neutral domain*" (90; italics mine). Which appears to be precisely what has happened in the last 30 years. After a (brief) phase in which "post-communist" globalization was thought of as a stable and "peaceful" era, given the planetary hegemony of the U.S., the first cracks, evenly distributed in two categories, were glimpsed: humanitarian wars and, even more, the emergence of antagonists—enemies—of the globalized order. Both converged in supporting the thesis that history—and conflicts—were far from over. As for the "humanitarian" wars, mostly denominated as such in English and qualified as international police operations, definitions aside, they remained wars nonetheless; nor even very appreciable according to the intentions expressed, since already four centuries ago Francisco Suarez warned against such wars. As regards the enemy of the "new order," at first Islamic fundamentalism, the whole thing proved that an order, however desirable, cannot disregard the fact that some group of men do not appreciate it, and to such an intense degree that they go so far (always) as to fight it politically, and in extreme cases, with arms.

It was so evident that the "new order" was dialectically generating new hostilities, new enemies and new conflicts.

It remained, and in part remains, unclear on what spiritual center of reference the opposition, internal to the Euro-Atlantic West, between populists and globalists is based. What is clear, however—and can serve to identify the center of reference—is that sovereign-populist-identitarians on the one hand and

globalists on the other refer to opposing pairs of values/ideas that we list below (without claiming to be exhaustive), of which the first column refers to sovereign-populism, the second to globalization:

NATION/HUMANITY
EXISTING/NORMATIVE
COMMUNITY/SOCIETY
NATIONAL INTEREST/GLOBAL INTEREST

It is barely worth mentioning a few examples. For existing/normative, I would refer to what [I wrote](#) about the Hungarian Constitution. As for the community/society opposition, it is less obvious but begins to emerge from the constitutional declarations of "sovereigntist" countries (see the Polish and Hungarian Constitutions).

That the term *a quo and ad quem* of these is the nation and not humanity is quite obvious and needs no explanation.

When it comes to the national interest, it is also evident as a government objective, apart from the recent events of Diciotti and Interior Minister Salvini, which have brought it back to the center of the political debate. And it could be referred to as a "re-establishment" because it has always been the compass of the modern state (and ancient political syntheses).

To find a phrase that sums up the position of the sovereigntists in a few words, one can just go back to Sieyès' statement: "The Nation is all that it can be by the mere fact of existing." A statement that would surely shock a globalist.

And continuing the abbot's quotations, among many: "The nations of the earth are to be regarded as individuals devoid of all social ties, that is, as they say, in the state of nature. The exercise of their will is free and independent of all civil forms...However a nation wills, it is sufficient that it wills; all forms are good, and its will is always supreme law...a nation can neither alienate nor interdict to itself the faculty of will; and whatever its will may be, it cannot lose the right to change it should its interest demand it."

The second conception to be considered in assessing the contemporary political situation is the one that emerges, among Schmitt's writings, from [Land and Sea](#) (*Land und Meer*). The foundation of this text

is that human existence is determined by the space in which it lives, its perception of it and the opportunities space offers. Therefore, this determines or co-determines political, economic and social relations—in particular, law. Maurice Hauriou wrote that the law known, elaborated, and applied by jurists is that of sedentary societies, based on the relationship with the land (and thus, also with territory as an element of the political institution, particularly—but not only—of the modern state). While the French jurist contrasted sedentary societies with nomadic ones and explained much of the institutions of the former with the relationship with the land and with an existence oriented to regular production, Schmitt deepened the diversity between maritime existence and land existence, and in particular that "universal history is a history of the struggle of the power of the sea against the power of the land."

What was new in modern history, Schmitt argued, was that Britain, in the 16th century, decided on a maritime existence, far more than maritime powers such as Athens or Venice and to some extent, even Carthage had done in other eras. Hence the English commercial (and industrial) expansion. Hegel also emphasizes certain different types of activities, and tying the development of industry and trade to the sea (*Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, §247).

This fact was considered by Schmitt to be decisive for both international law and the Westphalian European political order. The resulting balance, he derived from that of land and sea (continental powers and maritime power) and between European states. None of which were capable of hegemonizing the others, because they would not have the strength to impose themselves on a coalition of them, somewhat as Machiavelli noted for the Italian states (and the balance among them) of his era. In this sense, the sovereignty of the states, built around the legal equality of the states—disregarding the factual equality, made some sense, precisely because the factual equality among them—or at least among the major ones—was not so far off; and, on the other hand, the disparity could be compensated for by a shrewd policy of alliances (and conversely of neutrality).

This all came into crisis with the 20th century; Schmitt argued that "in international law, generic and universalistic ideas are the typical weapons of interventionism;" and that "A legal conception coordinated with an empire spread over the whole earth (i.e., the British empire) naturally tends toward universalistic arguments." He continues: "Such a conception does not concern a determined and united space nor its internal order, but in the first instance the security of communications between the scattered portions of the empire" (*Völkerrechtliche Formen des modernen Imperialismus*).

In the paper, "Great Space against Universalism," ("*Großraum gegen Universalismus*") the Plettenberg

jurist reiterated, with reference to the Monroe doctrine, the contradictory nature of the universalist interpretation to the original enunciation of that doctrine. Schmitt writes, "It is essential that the Monroe doctrine remain authentic and not falsified, as long as the idea of a concretely determined great space, in which powers foreign to space cannot meddle, is fixed. The opposite of such a fundamental principle, conceived from concrete space, is a universalistic world principle, embracing the whole earth and humanity. This naturally leads to intrusions of everyone into everything. While the idea of space contains a point of view of delimitation and division and for *this reason enunciates an ordering juridical principle, the universalistic claim of world intromission destroys all rational delimitation and distinction*" (italics mine).

Schmitt continues: "In effect, the original American Monroe doctrine has nothing to do with *the fundamental principles and methods of modern liberal-capitalist imperialism*. As a true doctrine of space it stands, on the contrary, in pronounced opposition to a transformation of the earth into *an abstract world market of capital without regard to space*... That such a falsification of the Monroe doctrine into an imperialistic principle of world trade was possible will remain for all time *a striking example of the intoxicating influence of empty buzzwords*." As for the interpretation given it by Woodrow Wilson: "he did not mean roughly a conforming transference of the spatial, non-interventionist thinking contained in the true Monroe doctrine to other spaces, but on the contrary a spatial and unlimited extension of liberal democratic principles to the whole earth and to all mankind. In this way he sought a justification for his unprecedented interference in non-European space" (italics mine).

Schmitt continues that the two Roosevelts and Wilson made "a specifically American spatial thinking a world ideology above states and peoples; they attempted to use the Monroe Doctrine as an instrument of Anglo-Saxon capital's domination of the world market."

This has resulted in converting "a spatially conceived principle of non-interference into a general system of delocalized meddling" and thus has become an ideological tool of democracy and "the conceptions associated with it, particularly 'free' world trade and 'free' world markets, in place of the original and true Monroe principle." Combining for the purpose status quo and pacta sunt servanda, "that is, a simple contractual positivism," with the ideological principles of liberal-capitalism.

The overall result is that the Monroe Doctrine, as interpreted in the years between the two world wars, gives the measure "of the contrast between a *clear spatial order resting on the fundamental principle of non-intervention by foreign powers in space against a universalist ideology, which turns the whole earth*

into the battleground of its interventions and stands in the way of any natural growth of living peoples" (italics mine).

The situation today is different: the evolution of the international order with the UN (and the UN Charter), the prohibition of the use of force (see Art. 2, 4 of the UN Charter), the powers of the Security Council, the doctrine of "responsibility to protect," peacekeeping operations, and especially the "defense of human rights" (and more) have complicated the situation.

What can the lessons of Carl Schmitt and, in particular, the doctrine of "large spaces" be used for?

It seems to be possible to answer that two conceptions (explicit and implicit to the same) and yet intersecting can be usefully applied. The first of which is political realism in relation to the concept of sovereignty. As the German jurist writes, the problem of sovereignty, arguably the main one, is to reconcile the political aspect with the legal aspect. For if the distinctive feature of sovereignty is legal absoluteness (not being conditioned by law but being "above" it), it must be combined with factual limits (with the familiar problematic issue of how much absoluteness applies internally and how much absoluteness can apply externally, i.e., with respect to subjects of international law (states and "order in fieri" distinguished by Bodin early on). As Schmitt writes "In political reality there is no supreme power, that is, greater than all, *irresistible and functioning with the security of the law of nature... The reconciliation of supreme power in fact and in law constitutes the basic problem of the concept of sovereignty. Hence all difficulties arise*" (italics mine). For another is the sovereignty of the U.S.A. or China, another that of San Marino or Liechtenstein. Transposed to the contemporary situation, this means that while one censures—rightly—violations of "human rights" or genocide (e.g., of the Kurds in Iraq) and goes off to wage a "just war" on the Rwandans or Saddam, one is careful not to wage war on Putin over the Donbass or Crimea, nor on China over Hong-Kong. It should be noted that while Hong-Kong is under Chinese sovereignty—and at least the classical territorial character of this may apply—this is not the case for the aforementioned territories in Eastern Europe, both of which—prior to annexations and occupations—were part of Ukraine; which has thus suffered a violation of (its own) sovereignty—as opposed to China. At this point, given the "double standards, double measures," one wonders whether the criterion of "big space" does not apply as a concrete criterion of behavior and decision: while Russia was (in fact) granted intervention in a republic formerly part of the USSR, i.e., its own "big space," the same was not exercised to protect populations, human rights, and in the case of Ukraine, territorial integrity. Hence the realism intrinsic to the Schmittian conception (registers) and rules much more than the idealism of such. (Idealism, which in practice, is often the fusion of interests and patronage).

The second conception that appears to underlie the concept of "great space" is one that links Max Weber's concept of power (and of authority) and "law" understood here as "order." Weber writes in defining it, that "power designates any possibility of asserting within a social relation, even in the face of opposition, one's will." Shortly thereafter, he writes: "The State should be understood to mean an institutional enterprise of a political character in which, and to the extent that, the administrative apparatus successfully advances a claim to a monopoly of legitimate physical coercion, with a view to the implementation of orders" (*Economy and Society*).

In current usage, until a few decades ago, states were called powers, at least those capable of exercising command internally and thus protecting their independence, even without (or with minimal) external political hegemony. In factual terms, it is the ability to assert one's will that determines being a power. Which by applying Spinoza's formula, *tantum juris quantum potentiae*, determines the factual limits of powers and thus of the legal capacity to exercise them. As the Dutch philosopher wrote, "If therefore the power by which natural things exist and operate is the *same power as God*, it is easy to understand what natural law is.... By natural right I therefore mean the same laws or rules of nature, according to which everything happens, that is, the same power of nature; therefore, the *natural law* of the whole of nature, and consequently of each individual, *extends as far as its power*" (*Theologico-Political Treatise*; italics mine). And within the "great space" it is relatively easy for the hegemonic power to exercise it. Likewise, for the most part, it has an interest in doing so because of the connections and relationships that join it to its neighbors or satellites. Respecting them is the condition for a state of peace to be easily achieved. Far more than trying to impose a unity of the world, without that unity being achieved in peace by the only historically possible way: by maintaining the pluriverse, conforming to the arrangement of interests, powers and borders; that is, by limiting and determining it with objective criteria that can be easily perceived and applied. For as Schmitt wrote, the unity of the world is not the unity of the *ecumene*, but "of the unitary organization of human power, the purpose of which would be to plan, direct and dominate the earth and the whole of humanity. It is the great question whether humanity is already ripe to endure a single center of political power" (*Concept of the Political*).

That there is a religion, a theology supporting such a hypothetical center, which has the capacity to resist elementary objections and criticism, Schmitt does not believe so. Certainly not the ideology of progress, since technical and moral progress "do not walk together" (neither among the rulers nor the ruled). Nor can rationalism bring us comfort, if only, I would add, because De Maistre's judgment that man "by the fact of being simultaneously moral and corrupt, just in intelligence and perverse in will, must necessarily be governed" (so that reason is not enough) still applies; moreover, technical progress

has the drawback of increasing the power of government. As Goethe wrote, "it is dangerous to man that what makes him more powerful, without making him better.

Nor do we see it today in that (attempt/project) of world unity in which still find ourselves, even though it now seems to be drawing to a close. Behind the unity of a world, dominated by the victorious power in the bourgeois/proletarian opposition, it must be acknowledged that the Plettenberg thinker saw the political future well: a new friend-enemy opposition, a constant land/sea dichotomy, a peace through the balance of (and between) large spaces. That is, everything opposite of what mainstream propaganda spreads.

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