



# Enemy as the Essence of the Political

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CARL SCHMITT AND  
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## Abstract

*Violence and enmity are constant companions of human history and society. But, the concept of the enemy remained outside the focus of political philosophy and was subject to only sporadic consideration. That is until Carl Schmitt, a German theoretician of law and politics in his 1927 work *The concept of the Political* not only thematized the concept of the enemy but actually placed it at the very centre of the political. The following text offers a review of Schmitt's daring understanding of politics in terms of friend-enemy categories, which gave rise to a series of still ongoing controversies.*

**Key words:** *friend-enemy, politics, the political, order, enmity, war, persecution of enemy, political philosophy.*

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This text will present an unorthodox definition of the concept of politics which has been the cause of a series of disputes in academic circles. It is an understanding of politics expressed in terms of friend-enemy categories by a German legal and political scholar Carl Schmitt in his 1927 work published under the title *The Concept of the Political*. Carl Schmitt was one of the most important theoreticians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century whose ideas on politics and law attracted the attention of many great authors such as Jürgen Habermas, Leo Strauss, Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt, Slavoj Žižek, Giorgio Agamben, Jacques Derrida and others. That notwithstanding, his intellectual work remained overshadowed by his political engagement. Namely, Schmitt became a member of the National Socialist Party in 1933, and was soon after appointed chairman of the Union of National-Socialist Jurists. He is believed to have been one of the most important ideologues of

Nazi Germany who found justification for the Nazi dictatorship and 'Führer state' in legal theory.<sup>1</sup> Schmitt's written works reveal highly intriguing and bold ideas on sovereignty, order, free will, state of emergency, terrorism and politics as well as sharp criticism of liberalism.<sup>2</sup> Still, in view of his political engagement his ideas long remained *terra incognita* to wider circles of the academia.<sup>3</sup> However, the modern social and political dynamics which brought the problems of weak states (orders) to the fore along with an abrupt increase in political violence heightened the interest for Schmitt's ideas. Thus, over the past few years, many publishers started printing both Schmitt's original texts and the related treatises. One of his most important works is no doubt *The Concept of the Political*, and the following pages seek to present his ideas contained therein.

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Carl Schmitt deliberates on politics from the point of view of its essence, with the distinction between friends and enemies at its centre. Schmitt's approach to the concept of politics avoids its precise definition and contents, and in the first place establishes the criterion for establishing the manifest autonomy and specific nature of politics compared with other fields of life. Namely, each of the spheres of life is characterized by some opposites that actually distinguish them from one another. "Let us assume that in the realm of morality the final distinctions are between good and evil; in aesthetics beautiful and ugly; in economics profitable and unprofitable... The specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy" (Schmitt, 2001). These criteria must not be mixed or confounded since "the political enemy need not be morally evil or aesthetically ugly; he need not appear as an economic competitor, and it may even be advantageous to engage with him in business transactions" (Schmitt, 2001: 19). This mutual non-reducibility of these criteria in effect reflects the autonomy of each individual sphere.

The purpose of the distinction between friend and enemy is to denote the final degree of intensity of grouping and dividing. It does not mark its own sphere of reality, but only the degree of intensity of people's association or disassociation motivated by religious, national, economic or another consideration, which at

<sup>1</sup> Carl Schmitt was critical of National Socialism before the Nazis assent to power and was in 1936 and 1937 investigated by the SS who questioned his genuine sympathies for the Nazi movement and considered him an opportunist.

<sup>2</sup> Schmitt's most important ideas are found in the following works: *On Dictatorship (Die Diktatur)*, *Political Theology (Politische Theologie)*, *The Concept of the Political (Der Begriff des Politischen)*, *Theory of the Partisan and Nomos of the Earth*.

<sup>3</sup> Thus many encyclopaedias of political ideas and theory do not include Schmitt's ideas (e.g. *Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Political Thought*, 1987).



different times produce different ties. Thus, there may be a religious, economic or moral opposite which is not simultaneously political, but necessarily does become political that as soon as this opposite grows sufficiently strong to effectively group people as friends or enemies. What matters most is neither the motivation, nor the sphere wherein the opposition unfolds, but only the grouping which actually distinguishes friends from enemies. “And ‘class’ in the Marxian sense ceases to be something purely economic and becomes a political factor when it reaches this decisive point, i.e. when Marxist approach the class ‘*struggle*’ seriously and treat the class adversary as a real enemy and fights him either in the form of state against state or a civil war within a state. The real battle is then of necessity no longer fought according to economic laws, but has its political necessities” (Schmitt, 2001: 26). This statement could be subsumed under the well known formulation that politics is not everything, but everything is about politics. Every phenomenon is the more political to the extent that it gets closer to the friend-enemy poles.

Who is, in fact, the enemy? The enemy is neither aesthetically ugly nor morally bad, since the criteria cannot be subsumed one under the other, but one existence is existentially opposed to another, “so that in extreme case conflicts with him are possible. These can neither be decided by a previously determined general norm nor by the judgment of a disinterested and therefore neutral third party” (Schmitt, 2001: 19). He “exists only when, at least potentially, one fighting collectivity of people confronts a similar collectivity. The enemy is solely the *public* enemy. A private person has no political enemies.

The concept of struggle and enemy cannot be understood in abstract, as symbols stripped of concrete reality, and are given a real sense by the fact that they have and retain a relation especially towards the real possibility of physical killing. War comes from enmity, since it is merely the ultimate realization of enmity. It, as the most extreme political means, reveals the possibility of distinguishing between friends and enemies.

This, however, does not mean that war is an everyday thing and that people wage constant mutual wars. Crucially important in this respect is the existence of a *real possibility* for the outbreak of war conflicts which actually determines human opinion and behaviour. The political does not reside in the battling itself, but in the mode of behaviour which is determined by this possibility, by clearly evaluating the concrete situation and thereby being able

to correctly perceive the real friend and the real enemy” (Schmitt, 2001: 25).

The absence of a possibility of armed struggle would mark the end of politics. Should that happen we would be left with a view of the world stripped of politics, a culture, civilization, economy, ethics, law, art, entertainment, etc., but politics and state would no longer exist. Schmitt does not know whether or when this state of affairs will appear on Earth, but he is sure that, for the time being, it does not exist. That is why the assumption of this state as existing would be pure fiction. Schmitt, however, does not make the opposite inference necessarily deriving from his understanding of politics. Namely, he disregards the other pole of grouping, association and friends, and does not conclude that politics would not exist if grouping into friendly associations disappeared. He has thereby actually reduced entire politics to the level of adversarial grouping and expectation of war conflicts.

Politics is human destiny, and every individual and nation would be seriously deluded to think that formal declarations of peace and disarmament could transport them into the world of pure morality, economy and legality - a world free of politics. A disarmed, pacified nation does not automatically become a nation without enemies. It only becomes the victim of others who will, in its stead, undertake to make the decision in the crucial matter, the one of friends and enemies. “When a people no longer has the strength or the will to hold itself to the realm of the political, the political does not thereby disappear from the world. It is only a weak people that perishes” (Schmitt, 2001: 36).

The state as the competent political entity has the right to define the enemy, i.e. it has the *jus belli*. This right implies the possibility to demand from the members of the community readiness to die and be killed, and to kill people of the other, enemy side. Each state has the obligation to ensure peace and security within its borders, i.e. to create a normal situation as a wherein legal norms will be valid. Precisely this necessity to provide “normalcy” gives rise to the right of the state in critical situation “to decide upon the domestic enemy itself, for as long as the state is a political entity” (Schmitt, 2001: 38). That Schmitt argues, implies a “stronger or weaker - *ipso facto* impending or based on special laws, judicially efficient, overt or concealed in general descriptions - types of persecution, restraint, proscription or outlawing” (Schmitt, 2001: 31). Bearing in mind that in situations of this kind the political entity of the state turns problematic, consti-



tutional and legal norms cannot be applied, since they are the expression of that entity, and the only thing that remains is resolution of conflicts by means of war. Precisely this point reveals the specific nature of Schmitt's understanding of politics, wherein grouping into friends and enemies and the use of war as appropriate means is considered normal not only in foreign policy relations, but also in the internal political process.

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Schmitt's understanding of politics as a distinction between friends and enemies and his preoccupation with the state unity which may be attained by identifying and persecuting the enemy, is a direct attack on liberal ideology. Inspired by Habermas' premise of "a war of all against all" Schmitt actually sought to dispute the liberal negation of politics as a matter of "life and death". He wanted to point to the delusion of liberal ideology's suggestion of a third way between left and right, and contend that moralization of political discourse is no advance of democracy. Schmitt resolutely reminds that the essence of politics is the struggle and that no one can cancel out the distinction between friends and enemies.

This definition of politics prompted a series of critical reaction in academic circles. In line with the distinction Schmitt placed at the centre of the political, his readers group into his "friends or enemies" which is sufficiently telling of the controversy of his ideas. The experiences of modern totalitarian dictatorships (Nazism and Stalinism) driven by identification and persecution of enemies, as well as Schmitt's political engagement in the Nazi regime, account for the prevalence of enemies to his ideas that has for many years kept his works known to a small circle of political philosophers. But the modern social and political dynamics has shown that the existence of the "other", i.e. the enemy, is not characteristic only of authoritarian orders and that liberal democracies are not immune to it. The global anti-terrorist struggle, the search for and persecution of terrorists as mortal enemies of liberal democratic societies, started by the US-led western states in the aftermath of September 11, made many authors take a different reading of Schmitt's works and wonder if he may have been right.

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