

The Conservative Concept of the West: A Critical Perspective to Carl Schmitt's Political
Thought

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Carl Schmitt is one of the best known conservative political theorists of the 20th century. My presentation explores the various political-historical narratives that Schmitt presents in his thought. In short, I want to explain in which sense Schmitt's central political concepts and ideas take their bearings from a conservative understanding of Europe as the political and cultural arena *par excellence*. These different narratives are unified by two central features that define Schmitt's work and thought in general: on the one hand, in terms of political organization, Schmitt constantly emphasizes the need of political unity and homogeneity, and consequently, he rejects all forms of political universalism and unipolarism. For Schmitt, the political relationship must always be based on the distinction between the friend and the enemy. On the other hand, Schmitt's most important political concepts (the state, *Grossraum*, and *nomos*) seek to present clear factual divisions between groups, conceptualized as homogenous unities, and encounter the presumed "decline of the West."

Already Schmitt's early work *Der Wert des Staates und die Bedeutung des Einzelnen* (1914) reveals a political thinker who is a strong anti-individualist and a supporter of a centralized state. In his Weimar writings Schmitt is very critical towards modern political liberalism, the existing parliamentary democracies, and the universalistic tendencies of modern politics in general: after World War I, Schmitt saw himself "in battle with Weimar, Geneva and Versailles" – to quote a self-chosen subtitle of his essay collection *Positionen und Begriffe* (1940). Schmitt's Weimar era decisionism is based on the idea that the sovereign is the one who decides on the exception. For Schmitt all political orders are based on sovereign decisions and, in turn, sovereign political decisions presuppose the concept of unity (*Einheit*) and the existence of substantial homogeneity. These convictions are also at the very core of Schmitt's (1927; 1932; 1933) definition of the political as a relationship between the friend and the enemy and

throughout his Weimar writings Schmitt endorses a strong, centralized state on the domestic front, and argues for an international law based on the co-existence of such substantially homogeneous and sovereign nation-states.

Schmitt's later work can be read as an attempt to (re)define politics after the decline of commonly shared Christian values and after the breakdown of the Westphalian political order (1648–1914) that was based on nation-states as the most fundamental political units. The two central presuppositions of the Westphalian state order, so Schmitt, were the existence of colonies as well as the Western idea of a common Christian law. The first provided the basis for partial and limited warfare (*die Hegung des Krieges*) on the European continent and allowed Western powers to wage war on foreign soil without bringing the conflict back home; the second delimited the Christian peoples from other nations and areas of the world. Whereas the latter comes to an end with the acceptance of Turkey (1856) and later Japan (1905) into the originally Christian "family of nations", the First World War marks the end of partial wars and the beginning of total warfare. In a polemical sense, Schmitt describes himself as "the last conscious representative of the *jus publicum Europaeum* – its last teacher and researcher in an existential sense".

From 1933 onwards Schmitt gradually abandons his Weimar decisionism and begins to develop his later "concrete order thought" (*konkretes Ordnungsdenken*), which sees the factual basis of political institutions and order in the factually existing values of a given community. During the late 1930's Schmitt develops the concept of "large space" (*Grossraum*), which in his mind could replace the state as the fundamental political unit. At the eve of World War II Schmitt claims that the world could be divided between different cultural-ethnic large spaces. Each *Grossraum*, so Schmitt, would be led by a *Reich* – a leading power within a larger cultural

sphere of influence defined by a specific political idea. With his concept of *Grossraum*, Schmitt wants to theoretically ground a common European politics led by Nazi Germany. In his mind the European large space is directly set against the *Grossraum* of communist Soviet Union and the large space of liberal America. Schmitt's later thinking develops the concept of *nomos* from a similar perspective. In *Der Nomos der Erde* (1950) Schmitt emphasizes commonly shared values as the factual base of all politics and political orders. Both, Schmitt's concept of *Grossraum* and his later concept of *nomos* are exclusionist political concepts, based on fictional narratives of "the West" as an imagined community. After Schmitt gradually abandons the euro-centric dream of resurrecting the *jus publicum Europaeum* of sovereign nation-states (and particular national myths), in his concrete order thought, Schmitt conceptualizes the world, first, as divided into different cultural-ethnic *Grossräume*, and, second, after abandoning this concept as well, as defined by a pluriverse of culturally different *nomoi*.

My presentation explicates Schmitt's understanding and definition of the West through the various narratives present in his most important theoretical works, and compares the main traits of Schmitt's narratives to those of other well-known intellectuals who were a part of or strongly influenced by what Armin Mohler (1950) famously termed as the Weimar conservative revolution (e.g., Oswald Spengler, Ernst Jünger, Martin Heidegger, Thomas Mann). Through my reading of Schmitt, I elaborate the roots of similar dangerous, ideological, and simplistic conservative narratives, very much present amongst modern political debates and also common amongst much read contemporary political thinkers (e.g., Samuel Huntington, Alain de Benoist).