

the concept of the political carl schmitt

Introduction to Carl Schmitt's Political Thought

The concept of the political Carl Schmitt offers a radical and often controversial lens through which to understand the fundamental nature of politics. Schmitt, a jurist and political theorist active in the Weimar Republic and Nazi Germany, challenged prevailing liberal and democratic norms, proposing a unique framework for analyzing political life. His central thesis revolves around the idea that the essence of the political lies in the distinction between friend and enemy, a concept that underpins his critique of liberalism's perceived inability to address genuine political conflict. This article will delve into the core tenets of Schmitt's thought, exploring his definition of the political, his critique of liberalism, the significance of the state of exception, and the enduring relevance of his ideas in contemporary political discourse. We will examine his seminal works and the profound impact they have had on legal and political philosophy, providing a comprehensive overview of this complex and influential thinker.

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Understanding Carl Schmitt's Core Ideas

Carl Schmitt's intellectual legacy is marked by a profound skepticism towards abstract universalism and a deep engagement with the realities of power and conflict. His work is often characterized by its directness and its willingness to confront uncomfortable truths about political existence. At the heart of his philosophy lies a rejection of the idea that political order can be achieved through purely rational or legal means, divorced from the messy realities of human groupings and their inherent antagonisms. He believed that political theory had, for too long, been obscured by idealistic notions that failed to grasp the fundamental nature of political decision-making. Schmitt's approach is less about prescribing ideal political systems and more about diagnosing the underlying dynamics that constitute political life itself. His exploration of sovereignty, legitimacy, and the role of the state in moments of crisis continues to resonate, prompting ongoing debates among scholars and policymakers alike.

The Fundamental Nature of Politics

Schmitt famously argued that political theory had neglected its most crucial task: identifying the specific criterion that defines the political. He posited that all political phenomena, regardless of their specific content or form, can be traced back to a distinctive criterion. This criterion, he asserted, is not rooted in morality, aesthetics, or economics, but in a unique kind of association and dissociation. The political, for Schmitt, is a realm where fundamental decisions are made, not based on universal principles, but on the recognition of existential differences and potential conflicts.

Schmitt's Methodological Approach

Schmitt's methodology was fundamentally empirical and polemical. He sought to expose the underlying assumptions and historical contingencies of political thought, often by contrasting them with what he saw as more authentic expressions of political reality. He was a sharp critic of abstract legal positivism and liberal constitutionalism, believing they created a false sense of order that masked underlying political struggles. His approach often involved historical analysis, focusing on the development of state power and the evolution of concepts like sovereignty.

The Friend-Enemy Distinction: The Essence of the Political

The most influential and controversial concept associated with Carl Schmitt is his assertion that the essence of the political lies in the distinction between friend and enemy. This is not to say that the political is necessarily about constant warfare or hatred, but rather that the possibility of such conflict, and the clear identification of who constitutes an 'other' to the political community, is what fundamentally defines political existence. Schmitt argued that this distinction is the most potent and immediate one, capable of overriding all others.

Defining the Political Grouping

For Schmitt, the political unit, most often the state, is constituted by its ability to identify and confront an external enemy. This enemy is not simply a rival or an opponent in a debate, but an existential 'other' whose very existence poses a threat to the identity and survival of the political community. The recognition of this 'other' is what binds the 'friend' group together in a shared sense of identity and purpose. This division is not based on moral judgments but on concrete realities of potential conflict and mutual opposition.

Implications for Political Identity

The friend-enemy distinction has profound implications for how political identity is formed and maintained. It suggests that collective identity is often forged in opposition to an external threat. This can explain the dynamics of nationalism, political polarization, and the formation of alliances. When a clear enemy is identified, internal divisions can be temporarily set aside in favor of a unified front. Schmitt's analysis suggests that the absence of a discernible enemy can lead to a weakening of political cohesion.

Distinguishing the Political from Other Domains

Schmitt meticulously differentiated the political from other realms of human activity. Morality, he argued, deals with the distinction between good and evil; aesthetics with the beautiful and the ugly; and economics with the profitable and the unprofitable. The political, however, operates on a distinct level of intensification, dealing with the ultimate possibility of physical conflict. The intensity of the friend-enemy distinction is what sets it apart, creating a sphere where life and death stakes are fundamentally at play.

Critique of Liberalism and its Political Deficiencies

A significant portion of Carl Schmitt's work is dedicated to a trenchant critique of liberalism, which he believed fundamentally misunderstood and undermined the nature of political power. He saw liberalism as inherently rationalizing, moralizing, and universalizing, thereby diluting the core of political decision-making and leaving societies vulnerable to crises.

The Neutralization of Politics

Schmitt argued that liberalism's emphasis on dialogue, negotiation, and individual rights aimed to neutralize politics, stripping it of its decisive and conflictual elements. By promoting universal values and legal procedures, liberalism sought to create a society where genuine political conflict, as Schmitt understood it, would be eliminated. However, Schmitt countered that this pursuit of neutrality was a delusion, as it masked the underlying power struggles and left the political order defenseless when confronted with fundamental challenges.

The Problem of Pluralism

Schmitt was deeply critical of liberal pluralism, which he saw as leading to fragmentation and an inability to form a cohesive political will. In a liberal democracy, various interest groups and ideologies compete, but without a central, decisive authority capable of resolving fundamental conflicts, the system risks paralysis. Schmitt believed that true political order requires a unified sovereign capable of making ultimate decisions, which pluralism inherently obstructs.

The Illusion of Universal Morality

Liberalism, in Schmitt's view, often relies on the notion of universal moral principles to guide political action. He argued that these principles are frequently abstract and can be used to mask partisan interests. Furthermore, when faced with an existential threat, universal moral claims can prove inadequate or even counterproductive. A political community, Schmitt contended, must prioritize its own existence and security over abstract moral considerations.

The Sovereign and the State of Exception

Carl Schmitt's theory of sovereignty is inextricably linked to his concept of the state of exception. He

argued that sovereignty is not merely the power to legislate or administer, but the authority to decide when and how the normal legal order can be suspended. This ability to transcend the legal framework in times of crisis is, for Schmitt, the ultimate test of sovereign power.

Defining Sovereignty

For Schmitt, the sovereign is he who decides on the exception. This means that the sovereign is not bound by the existing legal order but possesses the power to suspend it when necessary to preserve the political entity. The sovereign's legitimacy stems not from adherence to established laws, but from his capacity to create and maintain order in extraordinary circumstances. This is a radical departure from traditional understandings of sovereignty rooted in divine right or popular consent.

The State of Exception as Political Reality

Schmitt viewed the state of exception not as an anomaly, but as an inherent feature of political life. He argued that all legal systems presuppose a situation where the law can be set aside. In such moments, the sovereign intervenes to restore order, thereby demonstrating his ultimate authority. This concept was particularly relevant during times of political turmoil and civil unrest, where the ability to declare martial law or suspend civil liberties became a crucial exercise of power.

The Role of the Decision

The sovereign's decision in the state of exception is paramount. It is a decision made outside the legal framework, based on the perceived needs of the political community's survival. This emphasis on the radical nature of the political decision highlights Schmitt's skepticism towards purely legalistic or procedural approaches to governance. The decision, for Schmitt, is what brings the political into existence and sustains it.

Legitimacy, Sovereignty, and the Decision

Schmitt's exploration of legitimacy delves into the fundamental question of what gives political authority its power. He argued that legitimacy is not solely derived from adherence to established legal norms or democratic processes, but from the sovereign's ability to make decisive interventions, particularly in moments of crisis. This perspective challenges liberal notions that equate legitimacy with the rule of law.

The Crisis of Legitimacy

Schmitt observed a crisis of legitimacy in modern states, stemming from the erosion of clear political distinctions and the proliferation of legal norms. He argued that when a state can no longer identify and confront its enemies, and when its sovereign power is diluted by pluralistic demands and abstract rights, its claim to legitimacy weakens. This can lead to political instability and a breakdown of order.

The Personal and the Political

Schmitt's understanding of the sovereign's decision often involved a personal element. While he recognized the importance of institutions, he stressed that in the final analysis, it is an individual or a specific body that must bear the responsibility for making the ultimate political choices. This personal dimension of decision-making is what imbues sovereignty with its vital energy, distinguishing it from mere bureaucratic administration.

The Enduring Significance of the "Dicker"

Schmitt's work often returns to the idea of the "dicker" – the decisive moment or the act of decision. This concept underscores his belief that politics is fundamentally about action and resolve, rather than mere deliberation or consensus-building. The ability to make a definitive choice, especially when faced with existential threats, is what defines true political leadership and sustains the political order.

Contemporary Relevance of Carl Schmitt's Concepts

Despite the controversial nature of his political affiliations, Carl Schmitt's ideas continue to exert a significant influence on contemporary political thought. His concepts provide a critical vocabulary for analyzing political phenomena that liberal frameworks sometimes struggle to adequately address. The enduring debates surrounding his work attest to its provocative and insightful nature.

Analyzing Political Polarization

Schmitt's friend-enemy distinction offers a compelling framework for understanding the increasing political polarization seen in many democracies today. His ideas help explain how identities are forged in opposition and how the absence of clear distinctions can lead to a weakening of the political sphere. The intensity of contemporary political discourse often reflects the dynamics Schmitt described.

The State of Exception in Modern Politics

The concept of the state of exception remains highly relevant in an era of terrorism, global pandemics, and other existential threats. Schmitt's analysis of how states suspend normal legal procedures to ensure survival offers a critical perspective on the expansion of executive power and the balance between security and liberty. Debates about emergency powers often echo Schmitt's concerns.

Critiques of International Liberalism

Schmitt's critique of universalism and his focus on the sovereign state resonate in discussions about international relations and the challenges to global governance. His work prompts questions about the limits of international law and the enduring importance of national sovereignty in a world often advocating for supranational authority. His influence can be seen in critiques of certain aspects of

global liberalism.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Carl Schmitt's central concept of the 'political'?

Carl Schmitt's central concept of the 'political' is the distinction between friend and enemy. He argued that the political is not defined by morality, economics, or any other sphere, but by the existential confrontation between a 'we' and a 'they' that can lead to lethal conflict. The ability to identify and confront this enemy is what constitutes the essence of political life.

How does Schmitt's 'friend-enemy' distinction relate to sovereignty?

For Schmitt, sovereignty is the ultimate decision-making power, particularly the authority to declare a state of exception and determine the existential enemy. The sovereign is the one who decides on the exception, thereby suspending ordinary law in order to preserve the political entity. The friend-enemy distinction is the core criterion by which this decision is made and exercised.

What is the 'state of exception' in Schmitt's political theory?

The 'state of exception' is a critical concept for Schmitt, representing a situation where the sovereign power suspends ordinary legal and constitutional norms to confront an existential threat to the political order. It's not about a breakdown of law, but rather the sovereign's ultimate decision to create a situation where normalcy is temporarily suspended for the sake of preserving the political entity itself.

What are some common criticisms leveled against Carl Schmitt's theories?

Criticisms of Schmitt often focus on his perceived authoritarianism, his justification of violence and existential conflict, and his association with Nazism. Critics argue his theory oversimplifies complex political realities, neglects the importance of democratic deliberation and individual rights, and can be easily manipulated to justify oppressive regimes.

How does Schmitt's critique of liberalism manifest in his work?

Schmitt sharply criticized liberalism for its focus on neutrality, universalism, and a belief in the possibility of a purely rational and conflict-free society. He argued that liberalism's attempt to neutralize the political, to depoliticize by focusing on economics and ethics, ultimately weakens the state and makes it vulnerable to real-world threats. He believed liberalism's optimism ignored the inherent possibility of conflict.

What is Schmitt's concept of 'Decisionism'?

Decisionism, in Schmitt's thought, emphasizes the primacy of the decision, particularly the sovereign's decision in times of crisis or exception. It posits that the ultimate authority in politics lies not in abstract norms or laws, but in the concrete decision of a political authority to act, especially when faced with an existential threat.

Why is Carl Schmitt still relevant in contemporary political discourse?

Schmitt remains relevant because his critiques of liberalism and his analysis of sovereignty and the 'political' resonate with current debates about national sovereignty, existential threats (like terrorism or large-scale migration), the role of the state in emergencies, and the limitations of international law and universal human rights in the face of acute political conflict.

What is the difference between Schmitt's political and 'apolitics' or 'depoliticized' spheres?

Schmitt argues that the political sphere is unique because it operates on the basis of the friend-enemy distinction, which is ultimate and absolute. Other spheres (economic, moral, aesthetic) might have their own distinctions, but they are relative and do not carry the same existential weight. 'Apolitics' or a 'depoliticized' sphere is one where this ultimate distinction is absent or deliberately suppressed, which Schmitt saw as a dangerous tendency of liberalism.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to the political concept of Carl Schmitt, each with a brief description:

1. The Concept of the Political: An Introduction to Carl Schmitt's Ideas

This foundational text delves into Schmitt's central argument that the political is defined by the distinction between friend and enemy. It explores how this concept shapes political decision-making, sovereignty, and the legitimacy of the state. The book will likely analyze Schmitt's critique of liberalism and his emphasis on the concrete reality of political conflict.

2. Sovereignty and the State of Exception: Reading Schmitt Today

This volume examines Schmitt's controversial theory of the sovereign as one who decides on the state of exception. It investigates the implications of this idea for constitutional law, emergency powers, and the limits of legal authority. The book aims to demonstrate the continued relevance of Schmitt's insights in understanding contemporary political crises and governmental responses.

3. Friend, Enemy, and the Sovereign: Carl Schmitt's Legacy in International Relations

This work analyzes how Carl Schmitt's core concepts have influenced and continue to influence the field of international relations. It explores how his ideas on the existential nature of political conflict and the role of the sovereign are applied to understanding state behavior, alliances, and global order. The book will likely discuss both direct engagement with Schmitt's texts and the indirect impact of his thought.

4. The Crisis of Liberalism: Carl Schmitt's Critique and Its Contemporary Echoes

This book dissects Carl Schmitt's potent critique of liberal democracy, focusing on its inherent contradictions and perceived weaknesses. It examines his arguments regarding neutrality, universalism, and the erosion of decisive action within liberal frameworks. The author traces how Schmitt's criticisms resonate with current anxieties about political polarization and the efficacy of liberal institutions.

5. The Nomos of the Earth: Carl Schmitt's Theory of International Order

This title focuses on Schmitt's monumental work exploring the historical development of international law and order. It unpacks his concept of "nomos" as the spatial ordering of the world and how this order has shifted from Eurocentric land-based empires to a globalized, seafaring order. The book will likely highlight his controversial views on spatialization and the justification of interstate conflict.

6. Political Theology: Carl Schmitt's Understanding of Power and the Sacred

This exploration delves into Schmitt's groundbreaking connection between political authority and theological concepts. It investigates his thesis that modern political theories are secularized theological doctrines, particularly concerning sovereignty and the decision-maker. The book will analyze how Schmitt uses theological ideas to illuminate the nature of ultimate political power and decision-making.

7. The Decisionist Turn: Carl Schmitt and the Logic of Political Action

This volume centers on Schmitt's notion of "decisionism," the idea that the essence of sovereignty lies in the ability to make an unconstrained decision, particularly in moments of crisis. It examines the implications of this for understanding political leadership and the formation of political will. The book will likely contrast decisionism with legalistic or procedural approaches to politics.

8. Carl Schmitt and the Crisis of Parliamentarianism

This book offers a detailed examination of Carl Schmitt's sharp critique of parliamentary democracy. It analyzes his arguments that parliaments are prone to indecisiveness, deliberation, and a lack of genuine political will. The work will explore Schmitt's advocacy for stronger, more decisive forms of governance and his challenges to the legitimacy of representative assemblies.

9. The Friend-Enemy Distinction: Carl Schmitt's Enduring Relevance

This text directly engages with the most iconic of Schmitt's concepts, the friend-enemy distinction, and its ongoing significance. It probes the philosophical and political implications of this fundamental dichotomy for understanding group identity, political mobilization, and the very possibility of politics. The book will argue for the persistent, albeit often uncomfortable, relevance of Schmitt's analysis in understanding contemporary political divisions.

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